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**SHORT STORIES
OF PREMCHAND**

SHORT STORIES
OF
PREMCHAND

TRANSLATED BY
GURDIAL MALLIK



NALANDA PUBLICATIONS
BOMBAY

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DEDICATED

WITH DEEP LOVE

TO

DEENABANDHU C. F. ANDREWS

AND

TO THE UNDERSIGNED'S DEAR NIECES AND NEPHEWS

WHO HAVE ALWAYS WISHED

THEIR UNCLE TO TELL

THEM SOME STORIES

G. M.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Soon after Shri Premchand, one of the first great writers,—if not the greatest—of short stories in Hindi as well as in Urdu of Modern India, passed away, the late Deenabandhu C. F. Andrews suggested that some of his short stories should be translated into English so that those who do not know Hindi and Urdu may have a glimpse of his genius. The translator, though fully conscious of his inadequate knowledge of both the above languages as well as of English, humbly essayed the task. That was nearly nine years ago. Since then the manuscript had remained on the shelf. The Nalanda Publications have now been kind enough to publish the same. And he is, indeed, deeply thankful to them for this. their “venture of faith.” He has also to acknowledge his debt of gratitude to the Deenabandhu C. F. Andrews and Shrimati Sophia Wadia—Founder-organiser of the P.E.N. All-India Centre for having done him the great honour of looking through some of his translations and thus encouraging him in his attempt; to Shri Sripat Rai, the eldest son of Shri Premchand, for having granted him permission to publish the translations and to the editors of the *Harijan*, the *Indian P.E.N.*, the *Servant of Sindh* and the *Triveni* for having allowed him to include the translations of the stories, which were first published in their respective periodicals.

G. M

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❧ MY FIRST COMPOSITION

AT the time my age was about thirteen years. I was quite ignorant of Hindi. I had a passion for Urdu novels. Maulana Sharar, Pandit Ratan Nath Sarshar, Mirza Ruswa, Maulvi Mohamad Ali of Hardoi were the popular novelists of the period. Wherever I came across any of their works, I would forget all about my school and would not rest until I had read it from cover to cover. In those days Reynold's novels were in great demand and the Urdu translations of these were being published in quick succession and sold like hot cakes. They were my favourites, too. The late Hazrat Riyas, who is a well-known poet and who had passed away only recently, had translated a novel of Reynolds under the title of *Haram Sara*, while the then editor of the Lucknow weekly, *Oudh Punch*—one of the immortals among the humourists of India—Maulana Sajjad Hussain had translated another novel of Reynolds with the title, *Shokha* or *Tilasmī Fanus*. I read all these books in those days. I never had a surfeit of Ratan Nath Sarshar, even though I had finished reading all his novels.

In those days my father lived in Gorakhpur, where I was a student of the VIII class, or III standard as it was called, of the local Mission School. There was a book-seller by name Buddhilal, at Reti. I used to frequent his shop and read novel after novel from his stock. But as I could not sit there the whole day, I would take some copies of "Keys" to the English texts and "Notes" and sell them among the students of my school. In return for all this labour, the book-seller would let me carry home the novels I wanted to read. When the stock

of novels in the shop was exhausted, I read the Urdu translations of the *Puranas*, published by the Nawal Kishore Press as well as the several parts of *Tilasmī Hoshrubā*,—a voluminous book of romantic tales. By that time seventeen of these had already been out, and each of them was not less than two thousand pages of super-royal size. Besides these seventeen parts, I had also read not a few of those parts which had been published on different occasions. One can easily infer from these how vast the author's imagination could have been. It is said that these tales were written by Maulana Faizi in Persian for the entertainment of Akbar. How far this is true, no one can say. But, perhaps, hardly in any other language there exists such a monumental work. It is a veritable encyclopaedia. Even if some one were to make a copy of it during his allowed span of life of three score years, he would not be able to do it. What, then, of the composition thereof?

At that time an uncle of a relative of mine used to visit us now and again. Though he had passed the maturity point, yet he was unmarried. He owned a small landed estate and a house but being without a wife they had no value for him, and so he had no fondness for them. Therefore, he visited relation after relation and expected everyone to arrange for a match for him. And for this purpose he was always ready to spend a hundred or two hundred rupees. It is rather surprising that he had not been married, for he had a strong physique, long moustaches, a middling stature and a wheaty complexion. He was addicted to smoking hemp, so his eyes were invariably red. He was also religious in his own way. He offered an oblation of water everyday to Shiva and abstained from eating fish or fowl.

Eventually he did what unmarried people often do. He fell a victim to the arrows of Cupid, shot from the eyes of a

chamarin (a member of the menial class) who used to make cow-dung cakes in his house, give feed and fill to the bullocks and do similar other odd jobs. She was young and impetuous and, like the women of her class, also of a smiling face and an entertaining nature. It was a case of a pig becoming the para-gon of beauty! His thirsty heart stumbled the moment he saw the stream of sweet water. Presently, in course of conversation, he began to make advances to her. She at once sized up his intentions, for she was not such a simpleton. She began to indulge in coquetry, do her hair with extra oil, even though it might be of ~~sesame~~, brighten her eyes with collyrium and paint her lips. More slackness crept into her work. Sometimes she would just peep into the house for a moment and then go away, or cast a glance at him of an evening and disappear. The result was that he had to attend to the bullocks and other items of work. For, he felt he could ill-afford to fall foul of her. At long last love had been born in his heart. On Holi festival, in accordance with custom, he gave her a present but this year, a beautiful *sari* of richer material and more costly and a four time bigger tip, to boot. Matters went so far that practically the maid-servant became the mistress of the house.

One evening the *chamars* held a meeting of their *Panchayat* (village council). The members were not afraid of my relative's uncle simply because he was more affluent or influential than they. For, what they resented was the striking contrast between the behaviour of his father, who had never looked at a woman in his life (which was quite wrong), and his who stared shamelessly at the daughters and wives of the menial class. Persuasion would be, they felt, of no avail. And for aught they knew he might, on the contrary, create some serious situation. They thought that they could set right the whole thing at one stroke. Therefore, they decided to read him a les-

son, which he might never forget. The accounts of honour can be squared up only with blood; but punishment also can, and does, settle them to a certain extent.

Next day, in the evening, when Champa, the maid-servant, entered the house, he closed the door of the inside room.

The *chamars*, who had been waiting for such an opportunity, commenced knocking at the outer door. At first he thought that, perhaps, one of his tenants had come to see him and, that finding the door shut, he would go back. But when he heard the noise, made by the crowd, he was perplexed. He looked out of the key-hole and saw about twenty or twenty-five *chamars*, armed with sticks, trying to break open the door. What was to be done? There was no way of escape; nor could he hide Champa. He realized that he was in for trouble. He had not expected that his beloved would provoke a "situation" so soon, otherwise he would have been circumspect in giving away his heart to her. Champa, on her part, was twitting and teasing him, "You will not be a loser in any way. It is I whose honour has been besmirched. My people will not leave me alive. I told you with folded hands not to close the door. But you were possessed with passion. You have been well served, indeed, for you have blackened your own face."

Poor uncle! He had never before travelled this way. If in his place there had been an expert in the game, he would have hit upon a hundred and one expedients to extricate himself from that predicament. But he was absolutely non-plussed. He stood in the courtyard, reciting from the scriptures!

Outside the door, the hubbub went on increasing till the whole village turned up there. The Brahmin, the Thakur, the Kayastha—all came there to see the fun and to give a good hiding to the delinquent. For, what could be more exciting

and amusing than to discover a man and a woman closeted together! And howsoever humble or high-placed the man might be, the public would never pardon him. The carpenter was sent for, the door was broke open and the uncle, when searched, was found in the fodder-store. Champa was seen standing in the courtyard and crying. No sooner was the door opened than she took to her heels. No one said a word to her. But where could the uncle go? He knew very well there was no way out for him. He prepared himself, therefore, to receive whatever punishment might be meted out to him. And he had the punishment with a vengeance! Whatever weapon anyone could lay his hands on,—umbrella, sticks, shoes, fist, leg,—was pressed into service till at last he swooned and they, thinking him to be dead, left him alone. Even if he survived, they argued, he would not be able to live any longer in the village, for his estate would pass on into another's possession.

The news of this mishap reached us also on the wings of rumour. And I enjoyed it immensely. I laughed heartily when I tried to picture to myself the features of the uncle as he was being belaboured by the villagers.

For a month he drank, by way of treatment, a mixture of molasses and termeric. And as soon as he was able to move about, he came to us, because he wished to file, in our city, a suit against his fellow-villagers for their criminal assault on him.

If he had shown any repentance or humility I would, perhaps, have sympathised with him, but he was still as proud as ever. He threatened to report to my father about my fondness for novels and for play as if to browbeat me,—a thing I could not stand from him. For, now I had a sufficiently strong case against his character.

At last, one day, I embodied all that had befallen the poor

uncle into a play which, later on, I read out to my friends. All of them had a hearty laugh when they heard it. I felt encouraged. I made out a fair copy and, keeping it under the uncle's pillow, went away to school. I was half amused and half afraid in my own mind. What, however, I was most curious to know was what the uncle would say after he had read through the play. That day, therefore, my heart was not in my books but at home. So as soon as the school was over I made for home. But when I was near it I stopped short. I feared lest the uncle might give me a severe beating. But of one thing I was certain—that he would not give me more than one slap because I was not one of those boys who took such things lying down.

But, behold! The uncle was not there on the cot on which he usually stretched himself for rest. Had he gone inside the home? I looked into his room, but silence reigned there. There was no trace of his shoes, clothes and bundle of belongings. I inquired from the members of the family and was informed that the uncle, without taking his meals, had gone back home on some urgent business.

I came out and made a thorough search for my first play, —my very first composition—but could not find it anywhere. I do not know if the uncle consigned it to the flames or carried it with him to heaven!

THE VOICE OF GOD

JUMMAN SHEIKH and Algu Chaudhari were fast friends. They were also partners in farming. They had an unshakable faith in each other's love and loyalty. When Jumman was going on pilgrimage, he entrusted his household to the care of Algu. And the latter, too, whenever he had an occasion to leave the village would place his family in the charge of his friend. But they differed from each other in their social customs and in their religious beliefs. Though they neither ate nor worshipped together, still they shared in the same likes and this, indeed, is friendship's real foundation.

Their friendship began when they were still boys. Jumman's father, Jumarati, was a teacher. Algu had served him with all his heart and had scoured his pots and pans while the teacher sat and puffed away at his hubble-bubble. Algu's father belonged to the old school. He was one of those who believe that the primary duty of the pupil is the service of the teacher, rather than the study of certain tenets at his feet; he used to say, that knowledge comes only by the blessings of the teacher.

Jumarati Sheikh himself, however, held a different opinion. He relied more on the rod than on his radiant love for driving home the truth to his students. And the fear of that rod was at the root of the high esteem in which he was held in the neighbouring village. So while Algu attended on his master, Jumman pored over his books.

2

Jumman had an aged aunt who had a little property. As she had none of her near relations living, Jumman, by mak-

ing all sorts of promises, cleverly managed to get the property registered in his own name. During the negotiations he showed her great respect and also saw to every detail of her comfort. But no sooner was the deed executed than all his courtesy and considerateness to her ceased. Thenceforward Jumman's wife, Kariman, also began to season the food she gave his aunt with a daily phial of verbal vitriol. The old woman suffered this indignity in silence, for whenever she complained to Jumman, he would turn round and retort, "You have not given me such a princely property—just a fraction of an acre—that you should expect anything better at our hands."

At last, one day, growing tired of the constant ill-treatment at the hands of Jumman and his wife, the aunt said, "Son, as we cannot get on well with one another at the same hearth, you may, instead, give me some money every month and I shall cook my own food separately."

Jumman replied wrathfully, 'Does silver grow on trees?' The aunt became furious. She threatened to refer the matter to the *Panchayat*, the village council of elders.

Jumman chuckled at this, just as a hunter, seeing a deer making unwarily for his net, might laugh to himself, and said, 'Certainly, let the *Panchayat* decide, because I also do not like your complaining constantly.'

Jumman said this because he felt sure that the matter was bound to be decided in his favour. For, who was there in the whole locality who was not indebted to him for some favour or other?

3

For some days the aged aunt, with her back bent like a bow, hobbled up and down the village, supporting herself on a staff. There was not a single good man in the village before whom she did not weep out her tale of woe. Some sent her

away with an ambiguous assurance of help, while others were shocked at the high-handedness of Jumman. A few advised her to be reconciled to her lot, for, they added, that as she was living within a stone's throw of the graveyard she had better spend the evening of her life in peace and prayer. Hardly one or two sympathised heartily with the old woman in her sorrow. At last she went to Algu Chaudhari and said to him, "Son, please come to the *Panchayat* when my case comes up."

Algu replied, "There is no need for me to go there; for I am quite sure many others will attend."

The old woman rejoined, "I hope so, for I have told every one of my trouble. Well, it is now their look-out whether they come there or not."

"I will come, but excuse me if I do not open my mouth."

"Why son?"

"You know very well that Jumman is my old friend. I don't want to break off with him."

"For fear of displeasing will you refrain from speaking the truth?" Saying this she went back home.

All the wealth of conscience may be stolen without a man's ever knowing it. But let him hear a challenge to his sense of right and wrong and it is there again—vigilant and unconquerable! Algu had no reply to the old woman's words, but in his heart they kept resounding, "For fear of displeasing him will you refrain from speaking the truth?"

At last the day for the *Panchayat* session came. Sheikh Jumman had a big carpet spread under a tree and had arranged for a good supply of betel-nuts, cardamoms and tobacco. The village people began to pour in. Whenever any one came Jumman and Algu, who were sitting in a corner of the carpet, would rise and bow and welcome him. The sun had set.

On the trees overhead the birds seemed to be holding their own council. The barbers were busy feeding the hubble-bubbles with small bits of live coal and tobacco. The children were scampering about. The village dogs, thinking that some group feast was afoot, gathered all round in full force.

When everything was in order, the old aunt rose respectfully and made her deposition; "Members of the *Panchayat*, three years ago I transferred my property to my nephew, Jumman, on condition that he would guarantee me bed and board as long as I lived. But he has not been giving me sufficient food and clothing and now I cannot stand his ill-treatment any longer. I am a helpless widow. I can't sue him in a court of law. And so I have come to you for justice. If you find I am in the wrong, punish me unhesitatingly. If Jumman is guilty then persuade him to do the right thing. I assure you that I will accept your verdict unreservedly."

Ramdhan Misra, many of whose tenants had now settled down in Jumman's village and who therefore had a grudge against him, rose and said, "Jumman, whom do you appoint as the head of the *Panchayat*?"

Jumman noted that especially those people were present who had some grudge or other against him. So he replied, "The decree of the *Panchayat* is the decree of God. Let my aunt nominate any one and I shall have no objection."

"O good man of God," the aunt exclaimed, "Why don't you give the name?"

Jumman became very angry and retorted, "Don't make me open my mouth at this time! You have had your way, you may nominate any one you like."

The aunt understood the innuendo in his words. "Fear God," she said. "The *Panchayat* is neither a friend nor a foe

of any one, so you should not hesitate to nominate some one unless, of course, there is no one in whom you have any faith. But I am sure you trust Algu Chaudhari. Well, then I nominate him."

Jumman felt happy inwardly but, hiding his true feelings, said, "All right, let it be Algu Chaudhari. As far as I am concerned Algu and Ramdhan Misra would be the same."

But Algu did not wish to be dragged into the dispute. So he said to the aunt, "You know already of my intimacy with Jumman."

She replied solemnly, "Yes, but, son, for the sake of friendship one should not sell the truth. In the heart of the *Panchayat* dwells God. Whatever comes from the lips of the *Panchayat* comes from God."

So Algu Chaudhari was ultimately appointed as the head of the *Panchayat*. Ramdhan Misra and Jumman's other enemies inwardly cursed the old woman for this.

4

The hearing of the case commenced. Algu Chaudhari first addressed Jumman, "Sheikh Jumman, you and I are old friends, who have stood by each other in the past. But now you and your aunt are equal in my eyes. Tell the *Panchayat* what you have to say."

Jumman was cocksure that the die would be cast in his favour and that Algu's speech was meant to be a mere formality. He therefore deposed with an easy mind:—

"Members of the *Panchayat*, three years ago my aunt transferred her property to me on condition that I would maintain her as long as she lived. God is my witness that, ever since, I have treated her as my mother and have not caused her the

least trouble. There has been, however, for some time a tension between her and my wife. Now my aunt demands a separate monthly allowance for maintenance. Gentlemen, you are aware of the fact that her property yields no appreciable return. Furthermore, at the time of the execution of the deed no such stipulation was made. However, I leave every thing to the wise verdict of the *Panchayat*."

Algu Chaudhari was accustomed to working in Courts of Law, therefore, he knew the ways of litigation rather well and hence he began to cross-examine Jumman. This sounded on his heart like so many hammer-strokes. Ramdhan Mishra was simply spell-bound at Algu's skilful cross-examination, while Jumman was wondering what had come over his friend and why he was questioning him in that strain. "Even now," he told himself, "this very Algu was chatting with me. What has come over him so quickly that he is now bent on digging me up by the roots! What fault of mine can it be for which he is now trying to get even with me! We have been friends for a long time. Is such a long standing friendship of no worth whatever?"

Jumman was still engaged in solving the mystery when Algu Chaudhari pronounced the decision—"Jumman Sheikh, the *Panchayat* has carefully considered the matter, referred to them, and they have come to the decision that your aunt should be granted an adequate monthly allowance for her maintenance, for they believe that her property is sufficiently substantial to warrant it. If you do not accept our award, then you may consider the deed cancelled."

5

The *Panchayat's* verdict stunned Jumman. A friend had behaved like an inveterate enemy, had pierced his heart with a dagger, had failed him in his hour of need! "Truly," he told

himself, "Such occasions as this prove what friends are true and what false. And this friendship of ours was false. No wonder our country is in the grip of such serious epidemics as Cholera and Plague, for with such cheats and liars as this, how could things be otherwise?"

Ramdhan Mishra and other members of the *Panchayat*, however, were openly praising the righteousness of Algu. "This," they said, "is what a true *Panchayat* does; like a swan it separates water from milk, milk from water, truth from falsehood. Of course, friendship has its place but it should always be subordinated to truth and justice. It is because of such truth-speakers as Algu Chaudhari that the world goes on, else long ago it would have sunk to the bottom of Hell!"

This decision shook the roots of Algu's and Jumman's friendship. No more were they to be seen chatting together. One breath of truth had blown down their tree of friendship as it had been planted on the shifting sands. And whenever, if at all, they happened to pass each other on the road they met as sword meets shield. Jumman now harboured a secret desire to take revenge on Algu and so all the while he was devising ways and means towards that end.

6

Good deeds take a long time to be accomplished, while bad deeds are done overnight. So Jumman got an early opportunity to avenge himself on Algu.

Algu Chaudhari had a pair of strong, beautiful bullocks which he had purchased the previous year. They were the cynosure of the whole village. As luck would have it, a month after the *Panchayat's* decision one of the animals died. Jumman exploited the incident, saying Algu had been rightly served by God for his unjust award. Algu began to suspect that, per-

haps, the death of the bullock was due to its having been poisoned by Jumman. Algu's wife also was of the same opinion. So one day she picked ~~up~~ a quarrel with Jumman's wife and an endless exchange of abuse and invective followed between their ladyships till, at last, Jumman dragged his lady from the battlefield and silenced her with strong language. Algu Chaudhari, on his part, silenced his queen with his highly argumentative bamboo club.

The surviving bullock, singly, was useless for any service. Algu, therefore, tried to get another animal to complete the pair but failed. Eventually he decided to sell it.

Now in the village lived a cart-driver, Samjhu Sahu by name, who used to carry various commodities from the village to the market and back. He had set his heart on the bullock, for, he said to himself, that if his cart was drawn by that strong creature he could make two or three trips instead of one, and thus increase his daily income. He, therefore, approached Algu and, after a great deal of higgling, at last a bargain was struck and Sahu promised to pay rupees one hundred and fifty to Algu within a month.

Sahu began to tax the poor bullock to the limit. What was worse, he did not feed it properly. What a contrast to its easeful existence as the property of its former master! In those days only once in six months or so it was yoked in service and then it jumped, and ran for miles in pure joy. But now there was no such play, now there was an unending round of work—and well-nigh starvation! No wonder that a month of such treatment made its ribs stick out. Why, the very sight of the bullock-cart was enough to make its blood run cold.

One afternoon Sahu stowed in the cart double the usual load. The poor creature, already exhausted by three previous trips, could hardly lift its feet. Sahu whipped it hard to make

it go. The bullock started and covered a short distance but again stopped. Its master whipped it again, this time harder than before. The poor thing fell down on the ground, alas! never to rise again. Sahu feared that, perhaps, the creature was dead. He, therefore, unyoked it. Then he began to wonder how he would be able to get the cart home. He raised a hue and cry for help, but no one was to be seen because the roads of a village are like the eyes of children—closed in sleep as soon as evening comes.

Sahu was in rage. That day he had earned about two hundred and fifty rupees from the sale of *gur* (molasses) and *ghee* (clarified butter). This amount he was carrying in his belt. In the cart there were several bags of salt. He could not, therefore, go home leaving the cart behind. He finally decided to sleep in the cart for the night. He had a few puffs. Thus he spent half the night in warding off sleep. Then he fell asleep. He tried to sleep lightly as he was afraid lest somebody might rob him of his money. Nevertheless, when he got up in the morning, he found that the money was missing. Several tins of oil were also missing. He threw himself on the ground weeping and then made for home. On arrival he told his wife of his mishap, whereupon she burst out, "What an ill-omened bullock that fellow Algu sold to us that it died so soon and we have lost our life's savings!"

Three months passed. One day Algu went to Sahu's place to demand his dues. No sooner did the cart-driver and his wife see him than they flew at him like mad dogs, "You wretch, we have lost our life's savings and you have come to ask for money. Are you not ashamed of yourself for throwing dust in our eyes by selling a bad animal, an aged bullock, to us? Go and first wash your face in a ditch and then try to get the money. The best we can do is to make payment in

kind and that, too, in part. You can take away our own bullock and you can yoke it for a month or two and then return it."

Algu, at first, felt like returning home crest-fallen but he had not the heart to let go his one hundred and fifty rupees. So he, too, got angry. Sahu went inside the house to fetch a stick while his wife held the field. From arguments they advanced to blows. Then Sahu's wife went inside the house and closed the door and raised a cry. In a moment a crowd gathered in front of the house. At last some of the good-hearted villagers persuaded both Algu and Sahu to have their quarrel settled by the *Panchayat*.

7

Preparations for the holding of the *Panchayat* began. Both the parties to the dispute commenced canvassing the support of their friends. On the third day the *Panchayat* met. In the fields the crows were in council. They were discussing whether they had a right to the peas growing in the fields. It appeared that until this matter was decided they were bent upon expressing their disapproval of the watchman's vigilance by cawing vociferously. The parrots on the trees were debating whether men had any right to call them faithless when, amongst men, too, one's own friends do not refrain at times from deceiving one another.

Ramdhan Mishra asked Algu Chaudhari whom he would like to nominate as the President of the *Panchayat*. Algu replied meekly, "Let Sahu do it." Sahu rose and said in a harsh voice, "I appoint Sheikh Jumman."

Hearing the name of Jumman, Algu's heart began to beat fast and he felt as if somebody had slapped him in the face. Ramdhan observed this and asked, "Algu, have you any objection?" Algu replied despairingly, "No, why should I object?"

Verily, the sense of responsibility often works a great change in a person. Behold the editor in his *sanctum*—with what recklessness he launches his fiery denunciations of our Ministries! But the day comes when he, too, takes his seat in the Cabinet and then how prudent, how full of sound judgment and good sense and understanding his writings are! This is the sense of responsibility. Or take the hot-headed young man of yesterday over whom his parents were grieving, for a little while the weight of responsibility for a family lies on his shoulders and how patient and moderate becomes our lawless youth!

Sheikh Jumman in like manner began to feel a sense of responsibility, for now he was sitting in the seat of justice, and he knew that whatever he would speak from there would be accepted by the people as the very voice of God. He should, therefore, not allow his own personal feelings to sway him one way or another.

Algu and Sahu made their respective statements fully and forcefully. The members of the *Panchayat*, after hearing them, were all agreed on at least one thing, namely, that Algu must get the price for his bullock. Two of them, however, were in favour of reduction in the price because Sahu had lost his means of livelihood. But at the same time they wanted to punish him and make an example of him so that others might be deterred from treating their animals cruelly.

At last Jumman announced his verdict. "Algu Chaudhari and Sahu, we have considered your dispute carefully. Our decision is that Sanjhu Sahu should pay the price in full because, when the transaction was made, the animal was not suffering from any disease. The creature died of starvation and hard work."

Ramdhan, interposing, said, "Sanjhu Sahu deliberately killed the creature and he must be punished severely."

Jumman replied, "That is a different question."

Sahu thereupon pleaded for a reduction in the price.

Jumman answered, "That is left to the goodwill of Algu Chaudhari."

Algu was beside himself with joy. He rose and shouted, "Hurrah! Victory to the *Panchayat!*" and the whole audience echoed that cry.

"This is justice," the people were heard saying, "Verily, in the *Panchayat* dwells the Divine."

Shortly afterwards Jumman went up to Algu and embracing him said, "At long last I have realised today that the *Panchayat* is the Voice of God."

Algu began to weep. His tears watered the dry and dying creeper of their love and gave it another lease of life.

❀ THE VILLAGE WELL

WHAT stinking water have you brought me," said Jokhu to Gangi as he lifted the pot to his lips. "It smells so offensively that I can't drink it and all the while my throat is getting parched."

Every day Gangi used to keep jars filled with water. The well was far off and it was very difficult to go there often. Overnight when she had fetched water from the well there was no smell in it at all. Whence came this offensive odour now? Could it be that some creature had fallen into the well and died there and its body had decomposed?

Sahu the moneylender's well was on the outskirts of the village. But who would let her go there and draw water from it? Jokhu, who had been ailing for days, began to feel very uneasy. His throat was very dry and he was almost dying of thirst. "Gangi," he called to his wife, "let me have the water you have in the house. I shall close my nostrils and drink of it a little to slake my thirst."

Gangi replied, "How will you drink that stinking water? I shall just run off to the village well and bring fresh water for you."

Jokhu looked at her in surprise. "From where will you bring fresh water?"

"There are two wells, one of the Thakur, the landlord, and the other of Sahu. Wouldn't he let me have even a potful of water?"

"Don't be rash. The Brahmins will curse you. The Thakur will beat you with his long staff. And Sahu will increase your debt fivefold. You will have your bones broken to bits. Who understands the pain of the poor? Even when we are dying nobody peeps into our house to enquire how we are faring. Could then such people let you have water from their wells?"

Gangi had no answer to give to these arguments of Jokhu. All the same she did not let him have the stinking water.

2

It was nine o'clock at night. The worn-out labourers had gone to bed. A few idlers were at the door of the Thakur. They were talking of their courage on the floor of the court, the days of the display of physical courage being no more. How the Thakur by bribing the Police Inspector had got scot-free in a particular case, how he had obtained a copy of a certain important document in the teeth of opposition and that, too, without paying a single pie. One must only know the tricks of the trade.

Just at that time Gangi came to the well to draw water.

The light of the oil lamp was dimly reflected on the well. Gangi therefore waited for an opportune moment. But she said in her mind, "The whole village draws water from this well; why should we, the only unfortunates, be denied this privilege?"

Gangi's heart began to revolt against social restrictions and she began to think aloud, "Why are they called high-born and we low-born? Simply because they wear a thread? And yet every one of them vies with the others in cunning and craftiness. They steal, they deceive, they file false suits. Only the other day this very Thakur stole a sheep of a poor shepherd

and subsequently made meat of it. And that Pandit—his house is a gambling den all the year round. And our Sahuji—he sells *ghee* adulterated with oil. They get their work done and when we ask for wages they feel so ill at ease. Then in what respect are they higher than we? Perhaps because we don't cry out from every street-corner that we are high-born? If by chance I walk into the village, they, snakes in human form, stare at me with bloodshot eyes."

Just then the sound of some one's footsteps was heard. Gangi's heart began to beat fast. She picked up her earthen jar and the rope and hid herself behind in the dark shade of the trees, for she was afraid of those callous fellows who not long ago had beaten Mehgoo so severely that the poor fellow spat blood for a month—his only sin being that he had asked for his wages.

Two women came to the well to draw water. They were overheard talking to each other: "These men don't let us sit quiet even for a moment. They order us to do this, that, and the other thing as if we were their maid-servants hired for food and a few rupees." Then one of them said, "Stop, had I worked as hard in another's home, I could have been living in comfort. But what adds insult to injury is that our menfolk don't show any appreciation at all."

The two women went away after filling their pitchers. Gangi came out of her hiding place. The Thakur was seen going inside his house to retire. "At last," thought Gangi, "the field is clear". She went to the well with greater caution and circumspection than the prince of old who set out in search of the elixir of life. When she reached the well she felt a thrill of triumph.

She put the loop of the rope round the neck of the pitcher and let it down into the well. She looked round on all sides

with eagle eyes as a soldier does while making a breach into the enemy's fort. If she were caught red-handed that moment, there would be absolutely no hope of pardon or mercy. She lifted her heart in prayer to the gods and plucked courage.

Gangi gave three or four jerks to the pitcher in the well and then drew it up with surprising swiftness. All of a sudden the door of the Thakur's house was flung wide open, and the opened door was more dreadful than the mouth of the lion agape. The rope slipped from the hands of Gangi, the pitcher fell into the water, making a great sound. "Who is there, who is there?" shouted the Thakur and walked fast towards the well. Gangi ran away with bated breath. When she reached home she found Jokhu was drinking the dirty water.

❀ THE DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

THAKUR BENIMADHAV SINGH was a landlord and headman of Gauripur. His forefathers were at one time very prosperous. The village tank and temple were monuments to their name and fame. In those days several majestic elephants were seen swaying their stately tusks outside the door of the ancestral house, where today, alas! there was only one single lean and lank cow. But it appears the latter yielded a large supply of milk, for some one was always seen standing with a milking-can near her.

Benimadhav Singh had made a present of more than half of his property to the pleaders. His yearly revenue now amounted to about a thousand rupees. He had two sons, Srikanth Singh, a graduate who was employed in an office in Allahabad; the other was Lalbihari Singh, a strong, strapping youth, who daily breakfasted on two seers of milk. The elder brother had sacrificed his health to acquire the two magical alphabets: B.A. The result was a wan face and a weak figure. That is why he had a special fondness for, and faith in, medicinal herbs. This was borne out by the musical sound of pestle and mortar, emerging from his room, and by the constant correspondence, which he kept up, with the leading physicians of Lahore and Calcutta.

Srikanth, inspite of his English education, however, did not approve of many of the modern manners and morals of the West. He was, therefore, highly respected in the village for his orthodoxy. On the occasion of the Dussehra, for instance, he would plunge himself heart and soul into the festivities and

play some role, too, in the dramatization of some scenes from the *Ramayana*. For, the most important part of his religion was his admiration for ancient Hinduism. He was also an advocate of the joint family system. He considered the present-day tendency of the young educated women in the Hindu households to live apart as harmful, both to the community and to the nation. For his old-fashioned views, consequently, not only did the young women of the village, including his own wife, criticise him, but some of them even looked upon him as their enemy. His wife, however, did this, not because she detested her husband's people but because she held that, if notwithstanding the spirit of give-and-take there was no possibility of peace and harmony in the house, it was much better to set up separate kitchens.

Anandi, wife of Srikant, came of a respectable family. Her father, Bhup Singh, was a landholder who owned a small estate. A mansion to live in, an elephant, three dogs, hawks, honorary magistrateship—he had all these, besides a heavy debt to pay to boot. He was genial and generous by disposition. But, as ill-luck would have it, he had no son, though he had been blessed with seven daughters, all of whom were living. The marriages of the first three were celebrated with *eclat*. But when he discovered that the resultant debt had mounted to the vicinity of twenty thousand rupees, he cried halt to his extravagance. Anandi was his fourth daughter. She was more beautiful in body and soul than all her other sisters, and so, she was a great favourite of her father. He was, however, on the horns of a dilemma as to where to get her married. For, he did not wish to add any more to his monetary burden, nor did he desire that his daughter should feel that she was a Cindrella of the house.

One day Srikant went to him for a donation to some cause. Bhup Singh was highly pleased with his behaviour and so sub-

sequently gave his daughter to him in marriage. When Anandi entered her husband's home, she was surprised to find there an atmosphere and environment different from those in which she had been brought up. The house had neither windows nor a tiled floor, nor were there any pictures on the walls. There was no garden in which she could promenade with her silken slippers. However, she soon adjusted herself to the new order of things, as if she had never lived in the lap of luxury.

One day, in the afternoon, Lalbihari Singh brought home two sparrows and asked his sister-in-law to cook them up into a delicious dish. Anandi, who had been waiting for him to take his lunch, complied with his wishes. But, to her great dismay, she found that the quantity of clarified butter left over in the pantry was not sufficient for seasoning every dish. She, therefore, used the little that was there in cooking the meat. When Lalbihari sat down to take his food, he discovered that the pulse had no clarified butter in it.

"Why is there no butter in the pulse?" he roared.

"Whatever was in the house was used up in cooking the meat", replied Anandi.

"How could the whole quantity, which was brought only day before yesterday, been consumed so soon?" rejoined the former.

"Today, however, there was only half a pound in the pantry", answered the latter.

The hungry Lalbihari flared up, just as a dry stick speedily bursts forth into flame. And he observed, "Perhaps, in your parental pantry there flows a perennial stream of clarified butter".

Married women can stand abuse as well as the argument of the stick, but they cannot bear in silence any criticism of their father's family. "Yes", observed Anandi angrily, "In my

father's home even the hewers of wood and the drawers of water consume about a pound of clarified butter in a single day."

Lalbihari was beside himself with rage. He threw the plate of food on the floor and exclaimed, "I feel like taking out your tongue from your very mouth".

Anandi, too, grew red in the face. She retorted, "I wish my husband were here today to have it out with you".

Lalbihari could not control himself any longer. He had, in a fit of anger, several times slapped his own wife, who was the daughter of a small landlord. So he took off one of the wooden sandals from his feet and, flinging it in the direction of Anandi, growled, "I shall see to you as well as to him on whose support you count so much".

Anandi deftly parried the blow, but though her head was saved from injury, her hand was seriously hurt. Shaking with wrath like a leaf in the wind she entered her room. A wife is always jealous of the good name of her husband. Anandi, therefore, pocketed the insult.

Srikant Singh used to visit his village every Saturday. The quarrel between Anandi and Lalbihari had taken place on Thursday. Anandi did not take any food during the interval, for she was anxiously awaiting her husband's arrival.

When Srikant Singh came home it was evening. He talked about miscellaneous matters with his co-villagers, such as court cases, etc., till 10 o'clock at night when he entered his private apartments for dinner. Just as he was about to go inside the house, Lalbihari said to him, "Brother, tell, sister-in-law to be a little more tongue-tied lest some harm might come to her". Benimadhav Singh chimed in, "Yes, it is part of prudence for daughters-in-law to be respectful to the menfolk."

Lalbihari, thereupon, observed, "If hers is a respectable family, so is ours."

Srikant thoughtfully asked him, "But first tell me what happened?"

Lalbihari replied "Nothing; she flared up without any rhyme or reason. The fact is that she has not much respect for our family."

After dinner Srikant went into his wife's room. She was sitting tense with rage. Seeing him with an angry mien, she said, "I hope all is well with you".

Srikant replied, "I am alright, but nowadays you seem to have set the whole house on fire".

Anandi's blood began to boil. She retorted, "If the person who has poisoned your ears were here, I would teach him a lesson of his life".

Srikant: "But do not be so hot. Tell me what exactly has happened".

Anandi: "What shall I say? It is all my misfortune, otherwise the fellow, who is not fit to work even as a peon would not have disgraced me by striking me with a wooden sandal".

Srikant: "Be a little more explicit, for I do not know anything."

Anandi then truthfully told him all that had happened to other.

Srikant thereupon exclaimed, "What an insolent and audacious lad!"

Anandi, according to the traditions of her tribe, burst into tears. Srikant was quite calm, for he seldom gave way to anger. But tears of a wife add fuel to fire. The whole night

he rolled in his bed from side to side with restlessness. Early in the morning he went up to his father and said, "Father, it is now impossible to stay in the house any longer."

In the past Srikant had often taken his friends to task for yielding too much to their wives, pleading for living separately from the parents. But today he himself was doing that very thing. Verily, it is easier to preach than to practise.

So Benimadhav Singh was rather surprised and he asked, "Why?"

Srikant replied, "Because I, too, have my self-respect. There is no longer any justice in your home. Those who should respect their elders insult them. I am a servant of another and so I do not stay at home all through the week. During my absence my wife is greeted with the strokes of sandals. I can tolerate a harsh word now and again but I cannot help protesting against such merciless maltreatment".

Benimadhav remained silent. For he was dumb-founded to see his elder son, who had hitherto always been respectful, speaking in that strain. And he simply said, "Son, you are so wise, why do you talk like this? Do not yield to your wife in what she says, for it is thus that wives bring about the fall of families."

Srikant: "You are aware, father, how, in the past, I have been an ardent advocate and instrument of peace in many a joint family of my friend. But I cannot bear such brutal ill-treatment as has been meted out to my wife, for whose self-respect I am responsible in the sight of God, by Lalbihari. Suffice it to say that I am not punishing him in any way for his serious offence."

Benimadhav waxed wrathful and observed, "Lalbihari is your brother. Whenever he acts amiss you can cuff him on the ears. But—"

Srikant: "But I do not consider Lalbihari as my brother."

Benimadhav: "Because of what your wife has told you?"

Srikant: "No, but because of his indiscretion and insolence."

Both Benimadhav and Srikant were silent for some time. The former wanted to appease the latter but was not willing to admit that Lalbihari had done something wrong. In the meantime, a number of villagers came into the outer courtyard to pull a few puffs at the Thakur's hubble-bubble. Some of the village wives, who heard of the new phase in the domestic politics of Benimadhav's family, watched with keen curiosity further developments in the matter. There were others who, being jealous of the harmony in his home, were anxious to see a rift in the lute. They gathered there on the pretext of smoking and of showing their rent receipts. They twitted Srikant on being too much under the thumb of his father. Benimadhav saw through their ruse. He then and there determined in his mind that, come what may, he would not let his family become their laughing-stock. And he said to his son softly, "We are not apart. The boy, no doubt, behaved badly. You can do with him what you like."

Srikant, who had graduated from the Allahabad University but not from the University of Experience, failed to understand the spirit of his father's conciliatory move. Having been an adept in the art of debating in the University Union, he stuck to his point of parting from the family.

Benimadhav continued, "Son, the wise do not act on the advice of fools. Lalbihari is still a raw youth. You are a grown-up wise lad, you ought to pardon him for his offence."

Srikant did not, however, desist from his demand for living separately. He said, "Either Lalbihari will live in the

house or I. But both of us cannot stay together in the same house."

Lalbihari was overhearing all that was transpiring between the father and his elder brother. Usually he was invariably more respectful to the latter than to the former. Srikant also loved him, so much so that he had never knowingly wounded his feelings. On the occasion of the last village wrestling match, in which Lalbihari had won, he had embraced him in the arena in the presence of the spectators and as a largess distributed money among them. Lalbihari, therefore, felt sad at what he had overheard that day from the lips of his elder brother and he burst into a torrent of tears. No doubt, he was also feeling penitent for what he had done in the heat of the moment. He was, it is true, somewhat dull-witted, but all the same he felt that his brother was behaving both unjustly and unkindly towards him. He would not have minded if he had been slapped for his misdemeanour. But he could not brook his elder brother's threat that he would not see his face any longer. Presently he wiped off his tears and, going up to the door of his sister-in-law's room, said from outside, "Sister-in-law, as my brother has made up his mind not to see my face hereafter, I am going away from home. I have come to you to beg pardon of you". He could not continue any further as his throat was choked with feelings.

When Lalbihari was standing with a bowed head, at the door of Anandi, Srikant, whose eyes were bloodshot with anger arrived there. His first impulse was to avoid him.

After Anandi had complained to her husband against the latter's brother, she had been feeling for poor Lalbihari because she was kindly of heart. She never imagined that the matter would assume serious proportions. She also wondered how her husband had let himself go, for he was generally so

self-controlled. She now feared that Srikant might ask her to accompany him to Allahabad, where he worked. So when she heard Lalbihari's plea for pardon, she was very much touched and tears, the best solvent for washing away the dirt and dross of the mind, began to flow forth from her eyes. She then informed her husband that Lalbihari had been weeping.

Srikant: "Let him."

Anandi: "Call him into the room. I am sorry for having complained to you."

Srikant: "No, I will not."

Anandi: "If you do not, you will have to regret afterwards. He has taken it to heart. Call him in quickly lest he might actually go away from the house."

Srikant was adamant. Just then Lalbihari exclaimed, "Sister-in-law, convey my respects to my brother. As he does not wish to see my face, I shall not show him mine". And saying this, he retraced his steps and went out.

At once Anandi emerged from her room and, following him, held him by the hand. Lalbihari said with tear-laden eyes: "Let me go".

Anandi: "Where"?

Lalbihari: "Where no one may be able to see my face".

Anandi: "I will not let you go".

Lalbihari: "I am not worthy to stay in your house".

Anandi: "Promise that you shall not go away".

Lalbihari: "Not till I am assured that my brother has no animus against me."

Anandi: "I can truthfully tell you that I at least have no grudge against you."

Srikant's heart melted with love. He went out of his room and embraced Lalbihari. Then both the brothers began to

weep bitterly. After some time Lalbihari sobbingly said, "Brother, never again in future say that you would not see my face. You can mete out to me any other punishment you like."

Srikant replied in a tremulous voice, "Let us forgive and forget. Would to God that such a sorry occasion does not arise again".

Just then Benimadhav was seen entering the house. Seeing the brothers in each other's arms, he rejoiced and remarked, "Anandi, you have acted as high-born daughters do. They build what others destroy."

And Anandi became the idol of the mothers and the mothers-in-law in the village.

❀ TWO SISTERS

THE two sisters met one day after a lapse of a couple of years at a relative's house. When the first flush of their joyous meeting was over, the elder one, Rupkumari, noticed that her younger sister, Ramdulari, was decked from head to foot with ornaments; the complexion of her face had become more mellow, her temperament had taken on a little of heat and that in her conversation she was now cleverer than before. A costly Benares *sari* and a jujube-like red, embroidered jumper had further heightened her beauty. Could it be, she asked herself, the same Ramdulari, who in her childhood used to go about with dishevelled hair, look so foolish and frisk along in play here and there? The last that Rupkumari had seen her was two years ago, on the occasion of her marriage, but even then there was no considerable change visible in her figure and conduct. Of course, she had grown taller but she was as lean, foolish-looking and dull-witted. She used to lose her temper at trifles. Today, however, she appeared so different, as if the bud had unfolded into a blossom. But where, all these years, had she hidden all that beauty? It was not beauty but simply power to bewitch the eyes with the aid of silk, velvet and gold. But these could not alter the original lineaments of her face. Nonetheless, she did catch every one's eye. In any assembly of women her magnetism and magic of form would make her stand out.

If there were any mirror near about Rupkumari would have looked at herself in it. While leaving her house she had, no doubt, seen her own reflection in the looking-glass and im-

proved upon her appearance as much as she could. But now the memory of that improvised beauty had faded and only its dim outlines were to be seen on her heart's canvas. She was, therefore, impatient to re-capture it. Next time she sees herself in the mirror, she thought, she would compare her beauty with that of Ramdulari and try to find out the secret of the latter's personal charm. She had, of course, with her at the time all the aids and ingredients of facial make-up and a miniature mirror, too, but she was not in the habit of using them in company lest she might be misunderstood by the other women. But surely in the house of the relative, where they were sitting, there must be a looking-glass somewhere, at least in the drawing-room. She, therefore, went into the drawing-room and saw her own reflection in the life-size mirror there. There was no one in the room at the time. The men were out in the verandah, while the women were absorbed in singing. She looked at every aspect of her figure with a critical eye. Her face and her form were without a single blemish, but the former freshness and seductive attractiveness were absent. There could be no delusion on that point. But what was the cause of this lamentable lack? Could it be that Ramdulari was young, while her youthfulness had long since passed away? But this explanation did not satisfy her mind. She could not reconcile herself to a lower position than that of her younger sister. What simpletons these men be! Not one of them is able to assess true beauty. What they want are youthful blandishment and boisterousness. Alas! having eyes they see not. What have these to do with real beauty? They are but the tricks of time. True beauty transcends time. Let Ramdulari be dressed like her and then let a comparison between the two be made; all the magic of her external appearance will evaporate. She would look like a veritable hag. But who can explain all these things to these deluded men?

But Ramdulari's family was not well off. What she had got as dowry, apparel and ornaments, was very disappointing, indeed. Nor was there any other sign of their economic prosperity. Her father-in-law was an attorney in a State, while her husband was studying at college. During the last two years, whence had she got a windfall? Who knows she might have borrowed her dress as well as ornaments from some one? For, women have the vice of showing themselves off as of a higher station than they actually have. Let such a mask then remain with her. Rupkumari thought that she was better off as she was, adding that the fever of fashion was increasing every day. There may not be sufficient to eat at home, the husband's income from quill-driving may be about twenty-five to thirty rupees, but when the wife emerges from the house she struts about as if she were some princess. She would withstand the worrying of vexatious tailors and cloth-dealers, the frown and fusillade of angry words of her husband, weep and wax annoyed, but still not resist the intoxicating appeal of fashion. Ramdulari's people might be laughing at her childish behaviour, but she was too obstinately unashamed to be affected by their criticism. For, the only aim of women like her was to ravish the hearts of men whenever they appeared in the public. Sure enough, Ramdulari must have borrowed her jewels and dress from some one, shameless as she was.

Her sense of self-respect expressed itself in the changed colour of her face. What did it matter if she had no ornaments and apparel? At least she had not to hang her head in shame before another, nor fear anyone. She had her two sons who were more precious to her than all the wealth of the world. May God grant them a long life! In this knowledge lay her happiness. In having good food and good dress for oneself is not fulfilment of one's life. Her husband's family was

poor, no doubt, but it was respected: it did not oppress any one, nor was malediction meted out to it.

Consoling herself in this way, she went out again into the verandah when Ramdulari, eyeing her pitifully, asked, "Has your husband got any promotion, sister, or is he still rotting on Rs. 75?"

Rupkumari's heart was aflame with anger. "What pride!" She said in her mind, as if her own husband were a Governor. So she replied haughtily, "Of course he has had an increment. He is now on Rs. 100 grade. And that is something to be thankful for, because even some well-qualified M.A.'s do not get a job these days. Your husband must be in the B.A. class, is he not?"

Ramdulari snortingly said, "He has given up studying, sister. Further education would have only marred his prospects. He is now an agent of an insurance company and earns Rs. 250 per month, besides some commission. He also gets Rs. 5 per day as travelling allowance. So roughly his income amounts to Rs. 500 every month. He spends, sister, Rs. 150 on himself alone. You see, he must keep up a standard of life befitting his high position. Out of the balance of Rs. 350/- Rs. 100 are given to me as my personal pocket-expense and Rs. 250 are quite enough for running the household smoothly. His passing M.A. examination would not have been of any avail."

Rupkumari was inclined to consider all that Ramdulari told her as mere tall talk, but there was something so re-assuring in her manner that it was reflected clearly on her face. She, therefore, thought that she should quench the fire in her own heart lest she becomes mad with jealousy. She will have to assure herself after arguing it out that at least one-fourth of what Ramdulari had said was true, for more than that she

would not be able to bear. At the same time, however, she felt that if it was the whole truth then she would not have sufficient courage to confront her younger sister squarely. She feared she might burst out into tears any moment. What a contrast between her husband's monthly income of Rs. 75 and that of Ramdulari's husband; namely, Rs. 500! She could not reconcile herself to the latter figure even if it were possible to earn that much as a result of self-abasement. A man of Ramdulari's husband's position could be, at the most, worth Rs. 100.

So Rupkumari taunted her, "If insurance agents can get so much income and travelling allowance, then why are not all the colleges closed down? Why do thousands of boys waste away their lives on higher studies?"

Ramdulari enjoying inwardly the secret of self-mortification of her sister, answered, "Sister, there you are making a mistake. Anyone can get through the M.A. examination, but one who is fit to be an insurance agent is a rarity. That is God's gift. One may study all one's life, but it does not follow that he could be also a capable agent. To be a scholar is one thing, to be able to make money is another. It is not so easy to inspire another's confidence into the quality of your own wares and to assure him that your rates are rock-bottom. An insurance agent has to deal with all sorts of men, each more shrewd than the other. One has to dance attendance on rich men before they can be persuaded to purchase the goods. An ordinary person cannot have even access to them; and, if he is lucky enough to get an entry into their presence, he finds himself nonplussed. At first my husband also used to feel shy, but he is now as clever as a crocodile in his business. He will have an increment next year."

Rupkumari felt as if the blood in her veins had ceased to

flow. Why did not the cruel sky crumble down and the stony-hearted earth break up at such flagrant injustice? What kind of divine dispensation was this that she, who was so beautiful, so obedient to her husband, so affectionate to her children, so economical yet efficient in house-keeping, should be so disgracefully low, while Ramdulari, who was proud, arrogant, pleasure-loving and impetuous should be so high up in the social scale! However, she had still some hope that a way out for her peace of mind might be found.

She retorted banteringly, "Then your husband would get, perhaps, Rs. 1,000?"

"Not Rs. 1000 but Rs. 600 sure," replied back Ramdulari.

"Some simpleton of an employer must have been caught in the trap?" said Rupkumari.

"Sister," rejoined the younger sister, "business-men are not so simple-minded, as you think. They are much more keen-witted than you and I are. If you earn for them Rs. 6,000 then only would they pay you Rs. 600. Who could fool those who are adept in fooling the whole world?"

Seeing that banter was not successful in achieving her object, she then took out the weapon of insult and remarked, "It is downright cheating, for the whole day one has to weave a tissue of lies."

Ramdulari, thereupon, laughed loudly, for she at once realized that she had vanquished her elder sister completely. "In that way," she retorted, "all pleaders and barristers, too, are cheats. What do they not do for the sake of their clients? They even have to concoct false evidence. But it is these very pleaders and barristers whom we call our leaders, elect presidents of our national conferences, pull their carriages, shower garlands and gold on them, name roads after them and build

statues and institutions in their honour. Today the world worships money. No, it has ever been so. No one stops to think how money is earned. The people only burn incense before the rich, while the unfortunate and the incapable and the unadventurous wipe their tears of disappointment, piquing themselves on their so-called spirituality and righteous behaviour. But who ever attaches any value to these virtues?"

Rupkumari was silenced. For, she had now to acknowledge, though with anguish in her heart, that Ramdulari was more fortunate than she was. She realised that to continue any further in the way she had gone on would be only to exhibit her own narrowness of mind. On some pretext she will have to go to Ramdulari's house and verify what the fact was. If the younger sister had actually been blessed by the Goddess of Wealth, then she will have to content herself with lamenting her own ill-luck, consoling herself with the thought that there is no justice in the world and that honesty does not pay.

But will she be really at peace even then? Who is, however, ever honest in the world? Only he who has either no opportunity to be dishonest or who is not intelligent or strong-willed enough to create such an opportunity. Her husband, for instance, earned Rs. 75, but would he not be pleased if he could earn ten or twenty rupees extra? His honesty and truthfulness exist as long as there is no occasion to exercise the opposite attributes. They would evaporate at the first temptation which might come along his way. Furthermore, was Ramdulari so strong morally that she could prevent her husband from using his ill-gotten gains? On the contrary, she would feel more pleased, perhaps, and pat him on his back for bringing so much grist to the household mill. At present in the evenings, she sits without any enthusiastic expectation of her hus-

band's return home from the office, but then she would be eagerly looking out for him, and no sooner would he be in than she would, perhaps begin to search his pockets.

In the courtyard the women were singing. Ramdulari had joined them in the chorus. But Rupkumari sat disconsolate in a corner. She was feeling headache. So she was indifferent to the merriment all round. She felt she was a very unfortunate creature who was born only to weep.

At 9 p.m. the guests started to go away. Rupkumari also got up. She was just about to order a carriage when Ramdulari said, "Sister, why send for a carriage? My car would be here shortly. You can go with me and after spending a few days with me, return home. I shall send word to your husband not to wait for you."

Rupkumari's last weapon, too, proved futile. The desire to find out what the truth about her sister's pecuniary position was disappeared. She would now go back home and, covering her face, sulk in a corner. For, how could she go to her sister's in her rags? So she replied, "Not today. I shall come over some other day. The children would be anxiously waiting for me."

"But will you not stay with me for the night?" asked Ramdulari.

"No."

"Then tell me when you will be able to come. I shall send you the car."

"I shall let you know later on."

"You will forget. Not even once during the past one year did you care to remember me, while all along I was waiting for an invitation from you. We stay in the same city and yet for months we do not see each other."

In reply, Rupkumari could only say that her household work did not leave her much leisure and that she had thought several times to invite her, but she could not get a suitable opportunity to do so.

Just then Ramdulari's husband, Mr. Gur Sevak, appeared on the scene. He saluted his sister-in-law respectfully. He had an English suit on, a gold watch on his wrist, gold-framed spectacles on his eyes and a cigar in his mouth. He looked like a Civilian. Gentlemanliness and worldly wisdom beamed forth from his face. That he could be so handsome and graceful, Rupkumari had never imagined. His clothes fitted him very well, indeed. Blessing him she said, "Had I not come here, how could I have seen you?"

Gur Sevak laughed and replied, "That is a fine way to forestall me! Did you ever invite me and I did not respond?"

"I never thought that you considered yourself a guest in my house, for it is as much yours."

Rupkumari was watching how in spite of her harbouring jealousy in her heart she was becoming so sweet in her speech, so affectionate and so courteous.

Gur Sevak answered with an air of apology, "Yes, sister-in-law. It is all my fault. I never looked at the matter that way. But to-night you ought to stay at my house."

"No, today I am not free. I shall come some other time. You see, the children must be anxiously awaiting me."

Ramdulari interposed, "I have requested her so much but she would not consent at all."

Both the sisters occupied the back seats of the car. Gur Sevak was at the steering-wheel. Within a few minutes his house was reached. Ramdulari once again requested Rupkumari to stay at hers for the night but in vain. She, therefore,

took leave of her and went in. Gur Sevak resumed the journey. Rupkumari had just a glance at her sister's house and it cut her to the quick.

After they had gone a little distance Gur Sevak said, "Sister-in-law, I have carved out a career for myself. If I go on at this rate, in about three or four years' time I shall become somebody."

Rupkumari sympathetically replied, "Ramdulari told me everything. May God bless you wherever you are! But go ahead rather cautiously."

"I think it a sin to take any money without the knowledge of my master. One enjoys wealth only when one is honest. To get money at the expense of integrity is of no value. I deem such gains unworthy of one's acceptance. Further, who is there whom I have to fear? All the accounts are in my charge. My employer is dead and his widow has entrusted everything to me. Had I not taken control of her affairs she would have lost her all. The master passed away three months after I joined his service. But he knew how to size up a person's worth. He engaged me on Rs. 100 but at the end of the very first month he increased my salary to Rs. 250. By the blessings of you all during the first month alone I canvassed business to the tune of twelve thousand."

"What is the nature of your business?" Rupkumari asked merely to make conversation.

He replied coldly, "Just to import some machines and sell them."

Rupkumari's drab-looking house was now gained. A dimly burning lantern was hanging outside the door. Her husband, Uma Nath, was pacing up and down nearby. Rupkumari, however, did not wish Gur Sevak to alight from the car and enter, though, for courtesy's sake, she did invite him into the house.

But she did not press him, while Uma Nath did not even accost him.

Now her house began to appear in her eyes as if it were a graveyard, an emblem of ill-omen. There was no furniture, no flower-pot, no floor-cloth. All that she had consisted of a few broken tea-pots, old cots and a detruncated table. Till that morning, she had been pleased with her house, but now it began to get on her nerves. Her children ran out to her crying, "Mother, mother," but she scolded them and sent them away, saying she had headache and wished to be left alone. The food was not ready. But, then, who could have cooked it? The little ones had had milk, but Uma Nath had nothing at all to eat. He was waiting for his wife to come back home and serve him meals. And now she complained of headache. So there was no other alternative for him than to fetch a few fried flour-cakes from the bazar.

Rupkumari exclaimed angrily, "Why were you waiting for me? I have not contracted to be your cook. Suppose I had stayed away for the night, what then? Why do you not engage a cook? Or do you want me to drudge all my life?"

Uma Nath looked at his wife with great astonishment. He could not, however, divine the cause of her annoyance, because always he had received wholehearted co-operation from her. As a matter of fact, he himself had several times proposed to her about the cook but invariably it was she who had replied, "No. I shall have to then sit away idly. Why add four or five rupees unnecessarily to the expense?"

And today she herself was taunting and twitting him in such indignation.

Defending himself Uma Nath answered, "So often I have told you to keep a cook."

"Then why did you not engage one? If you had kept one and I had turned him out, your self-defence would have been justified."

"Well, then I am at fault."

"But you never meant what you said," Rupkumari continued still more angrily, "that was just to please me. But I am not such a simpleton as not to understand the truth. You have never thought of my comfort. You are happy because you have a slave to serve you, who just eats a loaf and keeps quiet, and has clothes given to her, whenever there is any surplus in the household budget. You simply place seventy rupees in my hands and then ask me to meet all sorts of expenses. Only I know how I make both ends meet. Every day I am faced with the problem, 'What shall I wear'. In your home my life has been wasted. There are in the world husbands who, for the sake of their wives' pleasure, pluck stars from the sky. Why go very far for an example? Look at Gur Sevak. He is less educated than you are, also he is much younger, and yet he earns Rs. 500 and his wife goes about as a queen. But you are content with Rs. 75 and have no ambition at all. You should have been born a woman; in vain is your manhood. What desires and hopes animate a woman's heart! But you have no thought for me. You do not feel the pinch. You want to have good food to eat and good clothes to wear, because, you say, you are the earner, but you never care to inquire how I live".

Uma Nath remained silent while Rupkumari discharged verbal arrows one after another at him. He had never consciously given her any cause for complaint. It was true that his salary was small but he was helpless in the matter. What he knew was that he did his duty faithfully and always tried to satisfy his superiors. For instance, for six months he had

taught his Head Clerk's young son without any remuneration, only that the boss might be pleased with him. More he could not do. At last he understood the reason of Rupkumari's wrath. If Gur Sevak actually earned Rs. 500 he was, indeed, very fortunate. But seeing another's broad forehead one does not break his own. He had a stroke of good luck. But every one cannot have such opportunities. Uma Nath thought, however, that he would like to find out if Gur Sevak really made that much amount or it was a mere fib. But granting he did get that much, was Rupkumari justified in taunting him and in speaking so bitterly to him? If he were to tease her by talking to her of a more beautiful woman than she who had captured his heart, how would she feel? Of course, she was beautiful, sweet-tongued and self-sacrificing, but in the world there were other women who surpassed her in all those excellences. But would all this warrant his insulting Rupkumari?

There was a time when, in his eyes, in the world there was no more beautiful woman than Rupkumari. But that fascination had worn off. Nearly a generation had passed since he had stepped forth from the realm of romance into that of reality. He had by now a sufficient experience of married life. They knew each other's merits and demerits. In forbearance, therefore, lay their happiness. But Rupkumari, in spite of being so intelligent, did not understand that simple truth.

Notwithstanding he sympathised with his wife. For, Uma Nath was broad-minded as well as had imagination. He, therefore, did not say anything in reply to Rupkumari's angry remarks. On the contrary, he swallowed them without demur. But for Rupkumari to have had the disturbing thoughts she had on seeing her sister draped and decked dazzlingly was natural, because she was not an ascetic, who could maintain her mental equilibrium under every condition.

Thus consoling himself, Uma Nath resolved to make inquiries in respect of Gur Sevak.

2

For a week Rupkumari was mentally agitated. She would fly into temper at every trifle, scold the children, harass the husband and bemoan her fate. She did the household work as there was no other go, but without her heart in it. She would not even look at those things, with which she used to feel a kind of personal relationship and in the cleaning up and arranging of which she used to be engrossed before. There was only one servant in the house. When he saw that the mistress of the house was so indifferent in matters of cleanliness, he, too, became very lax and let the things remain dirty and in disorder. The children were afraid of talking to the mother, while Uma Nath would run away even from her shadow. In the morning he would gulp down whatever he got to eat and go to his office. In the evening after his return from there, he would take his two children out somewhere for a walk. To speak to Rupkumari was to put a match to a magazine of gunpowder. His enquiries about Gur Sevak, however, continued.

One evening when Uma Nath returned home from the office, Gur Sevak was with him. After a lapse of days, today Rupkumari had been reconciled to her lot and so was busy dusting chairs and tea-pots when Gur Sevak entered the house and saluted her. Seeing Umariath, she felt so angry with him, that, if she could, she would have gone up to him and scratched his face. Why did he bring in Gur Sevak without previous notice? What must the latter be thinking about them and their condition? But Uma Nath ever lacked intelligence. She had always tried to hide their poverty, but he went about exposing it. He had absolutely no sense of

shame. He was the height of impudence. She wondered what she had done to deserve all that disgrace at his hands.

Rupkumari blessed Gur Sevak, asked him how he and his family were, and gave him a chair to sit on. He sat down and said, "Your husband has invited me today. I would not have accepted his invitation, had he not told me that you were insistent and so I had to find out some time to come here."

Rupkumari turned the topic, in order to cover up the existing tension between herself and her husband. She said, "I am sorry that day I could not talk to you freely. I was all the time thinking of my children."

Gur Sevak, looking round the room, remarked, "You must be feeling very uncomfortable in this cage."

Rupkumari at once realised how inconsiderate and un-understanding he was, for he did not know how to respect the feelings of others. He did not seem to be aware of the fact that all cannot be as fortunate as he, that only one in tens of thousands can be lucky like him. But could one call even him lucky? Where so many go without food, what greatness or grace could there be in the pleasure and prosperity of the few? On the contrary, their enjoyment is an index of their heartlessness and impudence.

She, therefore, burst out, "A cage is much better than a big house, for, in the cage the birds live in love, while a spacious place is fit for ferocious animals to dwell in."

Gur Sevak, perhaps, did not quite catch the insinuation. For, he said, "I would feel suffocated in this house. I shall arrange for a spacious house for you in my neighbourhood. You will not have to pay any rent, for it belongs to the widow of my employer. I, too, live in one of her houses. She has hundreds of them. But they are all in my charge. I can give

any of them to any one I like and it is left to me whether to charge any rent or not. So I shall select the best among them for you, because of my love and respect for you."

Rupkumari at once found out that he was under the influence of wine. That is why he was talking in that silly strain. She looked closely at him and discovered that his cheeks were swollen, while his eyes were shrunken. The tongue, too, was wagging. She began to hate the handsome, gentle-looking young man for his brazen-faced bragging.

After a moment he went on in as wobbling a way as before. "I respect you much, for you are my elder sister-in-law. I am always at your service. For you, not one house, but hundreds of houses could be at your disposal. I am Mrs. Lohia's attorney. Everything is in my hands and she agrees to whatever I tell her to do. She treats me like her own son. I am the master of her whole property. Mr. Lohia engaged me on Rs. 20/-. He was very rich. But no one except me knows whence his income was derived. He was a seller of contraband articles. Do not tell any one. He used to sell opium and thereby earn hundreds and thousands. Now I do that business. I have secret agents in every city. Mr. Lohia made me an expert in this trade. No one dare arrest me. I am on friendly terms with all big officials. I silence them with bundles of currency notes. No one can raise his little finger at me. I sell opium in broad daylight. I write in the accounts that I paid Rs. 1,000 as hush-money, but actually I pay only Rs. 500, the balance being for me and for my friends. I get lots of money and spend it like water. The old woman is all the time remembering God. After having eaten up any number of rats the cat is now going on a pilgrimage! There is no one to check or control me." Then, taking out from his pocket a bundle of notes, he continued, "Here is my humble

gift to you. Bless me that I may continue to live up in this grand style. Kuber, the Lord of Wealth, kicks those who continually think of the soul and of righteous behaviour. The Goddess of Wealth, Lakshmi, follows those who are ready to renounce their religion and honesty for her sake. Do not call me a bad man. I am not rich. All rich people are robbers. If tomorrow I come upon a fortune and have a *Dharamsala* (house for the poor travellers) built, the whole world will begin to sing my praises and applaud. No one will ask about the source of that wealth. I can get any saint to sing my praises. The 'stomach-saints' conferred on the late Mr. Lohia, the title of 'Ornament of Religion', than whom there has been no greater sinner. Everywhere this plundering goes on. The pleader charges a fee of Rs. 500 for half-an-hour's argument, the surgeon pockets Rs. 1000 for a simple incision with his instrument, the speculator juggles with hundreds and thousands in a single day. If their money is rightly earned, then mine is, too. In my eyes even the richest man is not respectable. For, I know what a master trickster he is. In this world only he who can throw dust into the eyes of others succeeds. To become rich by robbing the poor is an immemorial tradition of society. I am, therefore, simply doing what others do. To enjoy is the aim of man's life. I shall rob as much as I can and enjoy myself as well and when I am old I shall give away large sums in charity. One day, thus, I shall become a leader. Shall I count for you the number of people who have grown rich through gambling, for instance?"

Then suddenly Uma Nath entered and said, "Mr. Gur Sevak, come and have tea. It is getting cold."

Gur Sevak pulled himself up as to give Uma Nath an idea that he was his normal self. But as he rose to go his feet faltered and he fell down. He, however, steadied himself again

and swaggering and stumbling he went out of the room. Rupkumari heaved a sigh of relief. She felt stifled in the room the air of which appeared to her to have become sickening. Today she saw in their naked, ugly and fearful forms the erstwhile apparently attractive impulses and imaginations which had been flitting through her mind for days. The entrance of gross selfishness and tortuous trickery in her life, the tenor of which all these years had been simple, straight and sincere, had been like the incursion of a herd of bulls into a garden. She was therefore not willing to have even all the wealth and pleasures of the world at such a heavy price. She would now never exchange her condition with that of Ramdulhari, but be quite content with her lot. She pitied her sister because she was ruining herself by running after wealth and voluptuousness. But poor thing! She was helpless and so was her husband. And, indeed, they are not to blame at all. For, our modern society is one which worships wealth, which assesses a person's worth from his bank account and outward show, which is caught at every step in the net of temptation, which evokes and encourages low thoughts of jealousy, hate and exploitation. Just then Uma Nath asked his wife what Gur Sevak had been blubbering. He added, "I sent him away lest the police might be on his scent and I, too, might come into trouble like the worm in the wheat."

Rupkumari replied to him with pardon-praying eyes, "He was crowing about his sales of contraband opium."

"He told me to meet Mrs. Lohia."

"No, you had better stick to your clerkship. We are better off as we are."

"But there is no scope for self-enjoyment in quill-driving. What do you say to my taking a year's leave and tasting the pleasures of Gur Sevak's world?"

"A life of luxury has lost all its charm for me."

"Are you sincere in saying that?"

"Quite."

After a minute's pause Uma Nath said again, "Had I told you the same story, would you have believed me or not? Tell me honestly."

"No, never; for I could never have imagined that man, to grind his own axe, can dispense poison to others."

"I had come to know everything from the Police Sub-Inspector. I made him drink heavily so that under the influence of wine he might vomit forth all that was in his mind," continued Umã Nath.

"Perhaps, you too, were tempted?" interposed Rupkumari.

"Yes, that is so. But whence am I to have the necessary cunning to earn and enjoy?" replied Uma Nath.

"May it please God that you never learn that art! I am so sorry for Gur Sevak. I wonder if he got home safely."

"Do not worry. He went in his own car."

Rupkumari looked intently for a moment at the ground and said, "Take me to Ramdulari's house just now because I might be of some help to her. The garden of pleasure in which she is promenading at present is on all sides surrounded by goblins, who are lying in wait for her."

Uma Nath saw that Rupkumari was full of deep compassion.

❁ WHEEL OF FORTUNE

IT is 10 p.m. In a well-furnished, electrically-lit room in a mansion in Bombay is seated a millowner and Government contractor, Khubchand. In a corner there are lying huge piles of fruits, sweets and toys. And as his cashier reads out one by one from a list in his hand, the names of the high officials, he picks and chooses from the piles and makes up adequate assortments, variously graded according to the rank of the object of his adulation. For, Christmas,—the season when sycophants exchange their obeisance for offerings to the tin-gods of the Olympus—is at hand.

Once for twelve years Khubchand was the Mayor of the city. Even now he is the President or Secretary of several mercantile organisations. How far have his annual presents to officials contributed to his present pre-eminence, no one can tell. One thing is, however, well-known, that these cost him every year five to ten thousand rupees. Some people have given him the sobriquet of a toady. But what does he reckon? He is one of those persons who do not believe that their left hand should not know what their right hand does.

While Khubchand was still absorbed in adoring, *in absentia*, the tin-gods, who know the alchemy of transmuting copper into gold, the priest of his private temple entered the room and announced that the hour for making offerings to the Deity had already struck. Khubchand replied wrathfully, "Can't you see what I am doing? Your God will not give me everything that I want. Besides, one can worship Him only

when one's stomach is full. Let Him wait for half an hour or so. He wouldn't die if He is not adored or offered food forthwith." The poor priest went back with a small face to the shrine.

The principal aim of Khubchand's life was to earn money and every activity of his was keyed up in that passion. He made friends with others, gave largely in charity, joined clubs and even said his prayers morning and evening, with the set purpose of using them as so many cogs in his money-making machine.

After about an hour the priest appeared again. Seeing him Khubchand flew into his face, "Go away," he said, "I have no time to come to the temple now. I am engaged in the work of getting more money, for I know that when poverty comes even your God will fly out of the window."

The priest reluctantly retraced his steps.

Just then Khubchand's bosom friend, Keshoram, entered the room. The mill-owner embracing him said, "Hullo, I was only this moment thinking of coming over to you." Keshoram smilingly replied, "You are still at it. Shut up your shop. There is still one more day to Christmas. Do you remember your engagement for the night?"

Khubchand, raising his head and narrowing his eyes, as if trying to recollect something said, "Did I make one? I don't remember at all." After a few seconds, however, as if at a flash, he added, "Yes, yes, now I remember, I hope it is not too late."

"Come along now, do not lose any more time. I was under the impression that you must be at the place already, that is why I first went there before coming on to you."

"I sincerely hope," rejoined Khubchand, "that she will not be angry with me for being late." Keshoram remarked,

“Why worry now? We shall know everything on arrival there.” “But, pray,” entreated Khubchand, “apologise to her on my behalf.”

“That is no concern of mine. I can tell you only one thing; that when I went there, I found her in a flare-up. She was saying that as you don’t care for her, she too, will hereafter turn her back on you. It was with great difficulty that I appeased her. All the same, some excuse will have to be given.” Khubchand observed impishly, “I shall tell her that His Excellency the Governor had sent for me on some urgent business.”

“No, no, don’t say that, for that will not carry conviction to her. She will take you to task for not having consulted her before going to Government House. Do not be a fool, for what are Governors before Beauty and Youth?”

“Then, tell me, what pretext should I make?”

“Tell her,” answered Keshoram, “that you had 106° fever and that you shook it off only this afternoon.”

The two friends had a hearty laugh. Then they repaired to the house of the local Mary Magdalene to hear her music.

2

Khubchand’s cloth mill was one of the big mills in the country. Ever since the crusade for the consumption of country-made goods was launched, its offtake had doubled. And even though the proprietor had increased the prices by two annas per yard, yet there was no decrease in the sales. On the other hand, the foodgrains had become cheaper. Under the senseless stress of profiteering Khubchand announced a cut in the wages of the mill-hands. This roused their anger to white heat. For days there were parleys between him and their representatives. But the master remained adamant, because he

knew he could engage fresh hands on a lower scale of salaries. Failing, however, to arrive at any amicable settlement, the labourers had no other go but to down tools.

Next morning the compound of the mill was filled to overflowing with the mill-hands. Some were squatting on the ground, while many were strolling up and down. The gates of the mill were guarded by constables. There was a complete strike.

Then in the distance they descried a tall, slim, sallow-faced, solemn-looking youth. As he came nearer, the workers converged round him and asked him with one voice, "Has the master revised his decision?"

The young man who was their representative replied in dismay, "He is not willing to come to terms."

"Then we too are not going to lick his feet," they all shouted simultaneously.

The youth then addressed them, saying, "The proprietor is bent on the wage-cut. That is very unjust of him. During the last year the mill made a profit of a million rupees. All that is due to our hard labour, and yet he wants us to accept a lower wage. Truly, the greed of the rich is limitless. It is a thousand pities that none is prepared to stand by us. The Merchants' Chamber, the Government, the shareholders, all are on the side of the proprietor. But I am sure, God has not deserted us."

"But our master also is one of the devotees of God," one of them retorted sarcastically.

Their leader rejoined smilingly, "Yes, he is indeed a very great devotee. In this city there is no temple, which can compare in any way in material splendour with the one which he has built. The whole day, in his shrine, the brass-gods are worshipped with diverse ceremonies and with choicest delicious

dishes. That is why the people deem him to be very devout and prefer the goods of his mills to those of others, the result being that his whole outturn is sold out. But is he justified in cutting down our wages? Fellow-workers, let us resolve not to allow any outsiders to enter the mills and take our places, even if for doing so we are greeted with gunfire."

All of a sudden some one exclaimed: "The master! the master!"

At this the faces of the labourers blanched with fear, they began to feel fidgety. Some of them implored the constables to shield them in some hiding place, while others betook themselves behind the bales of cotton. Only a few stood firm. The master with an "I don't care" look alighted from his car and ordered the constables on duty to eject the mill-hands from the compound. At once the police *posse* whipped out their batons and belaboured the labourers. About ten persons fell down on the ground. Others took to their heels. Their youthful leader, however, along with two others, did not move from his place.

Such is the pride of power that it cannot brook any opposition. At the resistance of his men Khubchand took out his revolver and, in a loud voice, asked them to go out on pain of death. But they remained rooted to the spot. Eventually, he ordered the Head Constable to put the ring-leaders under arrest. But no sooner did the constables handcuff them and march them off towards the gate than about a thousand mill-hands sprang upon them and fearing that they would be overpowered, the former set free their charges. The mill-owner waxed so wrathful that, if he could, he would have made cannon-fodder of the minions of law and order. His own life was in danger and yet so obstinate was he that he didn't show any readiness even then to come to terms with his workers.

The mob, that was moving in the direction where the mill-owner was standing, stopped short all of a sudden. Their leader then advanced alone to him. The latter felt panicky as if he was going to be attacked. So he fired at the young man who fainted and fell down. This let loose their pent-up anger and they began to look daggers at him and aim their fists at him. Khubchand, therefore, climbed to the top of a stack of cotton bales and pointed his revolver at them. One of them from below cried out, "Set fire to the bales!" But just as the match was about to be applied to the stack, the wounded youth, though still bleeding, stood up, and all of them gathered round him. The whole sky resounded with cries, "Victory to Gopinath!" He raised his right hand and requested them to be calm. He then appealed to them not to indulge in violence. God, he pleaded with them, dwells in the poor and He is all love, so they should refrain from doing harm to their employer.

A rumble of resentment was heard from all sides. But none had the heart to run counter to the wishes of the leader, so deep was their devotion to him. They cleared the way for their master to go home in safety. Just as the master was getting into the car, Gopinath folded his hands and said, "Sir, you mistook my move towards you. I was coming only to assure you that you need not be afraid at all. But who knows what was God's will in your firing at me?"

Hardly had the car gone a few yards away from the mill-gate when Gopinath reeled back and fell down dead on the ground.

As Khubchand sat in his car and was speeding homewards, he was haunted by the gory figure of Gopinath. His conscience was constantly pricking him. He was talking aloud to himself: If Gopinath was his enemy, why did he then save his life, specially when he himself was at death's door? The ghost of

Gopinath, with hands in cuffs, seemed to be staring hard at him and saying, "Why did you kill an innocent man?"

Riches no doubt often deaden a man's conscience. But Khubchand's heart began feeling the stir of the Divine in him—the Divine who came to him in the form of an awakened sense of justice. By the time the car gained the gate of his mansion, his face had become a picture of poignant pain.

As soon as he alighted, his wife Pramila asked impatiently, "What is the news? Has the strike ended? I hope there was no violence."

Khubchand quickly went up to the drawing-room and, stretching himself at full length on a sofa as if to compose himself, said, "Thank God. I have come back home safe. I was surrounded on all sides by the malcontents. At one time my life was in danger, so I opened fire on them."

Thereupon Pramila inquired in a frightened voice, "Was anyone hurt?"

"Yes, Gopinath, the leader of the mill-hands was wounded seriously. This made the men furious, and they converged round me. I climbed up to the top of a stack of cotton bales. Some of the workers then threatened to set fire to the stack. Suddenly their wounded leader, though in great agony himself, stood up, advanced and, raising his right hand, dissuaded them from their nefarious design."

Pramila trembled, "This morning you didn't listen to me when I asked you not to go alone to the mill because I had seen an evil dream. Was the wounded man removed to the hospital?"

Khubchand replied sorrowfully, "I am afraid, he must have died soon after I left."

Pramila is one of those women who are full of faith in the wisdom of the Divine Dispenser of our destiny. God was her

sheet-anchor whenever the bark of her life was caught in the whirlpool of woe. In her imagination, therefore, she saw herself prostrate at His feet.

"That Gopinath must have been some great man in his past life," exclaimed Khubchand philosophically after a while, "otherwise he would not have saved the man who well-nigh killed him."

Pramila remarked, "It is only by divine urge that good thoughts arise in our hearts."

He queried out of curiosity, "Then evil thoughts also spring up from the same source?"

Pramila replied confidently like those who know something of the meaning of life, "God is the spirit of joy. Does light ever emit darkness?"

3

Khubchand was still pondering on Pramila's words when they were startled by some uproar outside. He, therefore, flung open the window overlooking the road, and saw thousands of men waving black flags and coming in the direction of the house. In the rear there was seen a bier which was wreathed in flowers. It was a vast sea of heads. It was the funeral procession in honour of Gopinath. The news of the death of Gopinath had spread with lightning speed in the city. In a moment the workers in all the other mills also struck work and swelled the crowd. All the shops were closed. The mill-hands seemed bent on avenging the death of their beloved leader.

Khubchand was nonplussed, and while he was still thinking what to do, a section of the mill-hands entered his office, broke open the safe and started to set fire to the account books. The cashier and the other workers took to their heels. Just then the Police Commissioner with a *posse* of policemen came

on the scene and ordered the men to disperse within five minutes failing which, he said, he would be compelled to open fire on them.

The mill-hands answered back with one voice, "Victory to Gopinath!"

Had this panicky situation arisen an hour earlier the mill-owner would not have minded if the police were to disperse the angry mob with a shower of bullets. But during the interval his heart, pricked by the stings of conscience, had softened down.

So, turning to Pramila he said, "I had better appear in the window and confess my fault, otherwise I don't know how many of those poor people might be killed."

"Why not," replied she, "straightaway increase their wages!"

"Just now they are thirsty for my blood, the announcement of an increment in their wages may have no effect."

Pramila replied with tear-filled eyes, "Then they will charge you with homicide."

Khubchand rejoined quite calmly, "If that is the will of God, what can we poor mortals do? Surely, my own life is not so precious that hundreds of other lives be sacrificed for my sake."

When Pramila heard those words she felt as if God himself were standing in front of her. At once she embraced her husband and asked, "What is then your parting message to me?"

He replied very tenderly, "God will protect you." Saying this, he went downstairs while Pramila burst into a torrent of tears.

As Khubchand descended the stairs he felt as if all his wealth, to amass which he had resorted to flattery, fraud and force, were slipping through his fingers. And yet he didn't seem to wince in the least. He knew he would be transported for life, that his whole business would come to grief and that he might never set his eyes again on his dear and devoted wife.

Khubchand folded his hands in forgiveness. He admitted before his workers that he had been unjust, angry and impetuous. They, however, seemed to be unaffected by his admission. The Police Commissioner then took him in custody.

Khubchand was kept in lock-up for a week, after which the hearing of the case began. One of the leading lawyers of Bombay appeared on behalf of Gopinath, for howsoever heavy the Counsel's fees might be, the mill-hands were determined to do all that lay in their power to vindicate the good name of their great leader. The court and its environs were crowded with thousands of spectators. As the accused pleaded guilty the case was concluded in a couple of days. His counsel, however, requested the court to reduce the sentence from transportation of life to fourteen years.

4

With the departure of Khubchand from the city, the Goddess of Fortune began to frown on his family. Within a year, all his property was sold to liquidate his liabilities. Had Pramila wished, she could have kept away her ornaments, worth several lacs of rupees, but she threw them into the fire of renunciation. She was reduced to utter straits, so that she had to live in a small rented house. After seven months a child was born to her. In the joy of the new-born one, she forgot all her sufferings.

Pramila brought up the child at a very great sacrifice. There were several of her friends who offered to

help her but she did not accept anything from anyone. She eked out an existence by hawking country-made goods amongst the womenfolk. When the child had grown a year or so old, she engaged a maid to look after it during her absence from home on business. In the evening when she would return home she would take the child in her lap and then on the wings of love she would fly to her husband's solitary cell in the Andamans. Everyday she would pray to God to bring her husband back to her safe and sound after the expiry of his term of imprisonment. Both Khubchand and Pramila spent the fourteen years of their separation from each other in the shadow of Hope.

5

It is evening. The young Krishnachandra, their son, now about 13 years old, is sitting with his mother. He is looking rather morose.

"Son," asked the mother, "your examination was over today. Is it not?"

The son replied sorrowfully, "Yes, mother, but I didn't do my papers well. The fact is, I am not interested in my studies."

As he uttered those words his eyes were filled with tears. The mother saw this and so observed very affectionately, "But my dear, you should take great interest in your studies."

"Mother," he replied, "I am haunted day and night by the thought of my father. He must have grown very old by now. I am all the time thinking that when he comes back I shall dedicate myself, heart and soul, to his service. What a supreme act of renunciation has been his! By the by, mother, I have made enquiries about the relations of Gopinath. He has a wife, a mother and a daughter surviving him. Both the

mother and the wife are working in one of the mills. The girl is two years older than I am."

Pramila asked in surprise, "How did you get all that information, son?"

Krishnachandra replied with a gleam of joy in his eyes, "Today I went to their mill, for I wanted to see the spot where Gopinath had been fired upon. But I could not locate it because on that site so many new buildings have since been put up. Seeing me many of the mill-hands came out of the mill and surrounded me. They said that I looked exactly like Gopinath. I, then, asked one of them to tell me if there were any survivors of Gopinath. At once some one went into the mill and called Gopinath's wife. No sooner did I see her sorrow-stricken face than I felt a great sympathy for her. Mother, I very much want to help her."

Pramila, fearing that the boy might be involved in local Labour politics, advised him to concentrate his mind on his studies. She added, however, that he might give to the family, by way of help, five to ten rupees every month, if he so desired.

Krishnachandra did not make any reply. But in his own mind he resolved that every day on his return home from the school he would just peep into the house of Gopinath's family and leave there some fruit or vegetable, bought with the pocket-money his mother daily gave him.

One day Krishnachandra was late in coming home. The mother, feeling anxious, began to make enquiries about him. At last she reached a dark and dingy house in a narrow lane where she found her son fanning the ailing wife of Gopinath. Seeing his mother he at once said to her, "Mother, I shan't come home. The grandmother, being blind, is unable to do any-

thing while the daughter is busy cooking in the kitchen. There is, therefore, nobody to attend on the mother."

Pramila felt rather dejected and replied, "Son, it is already very late. I don't feel quite at ease all alone in the house. Come now, tomorrow morning you can again come here."

Gopinath's wife, hearing Pramila's voice, opened her eyes and requested her to sit down. "I don't know," she said, "why your son is so kind to me. My own son would not have served me so tenderly."

Pramila cast eyes on the walls of the smoky and stinking room and lighted on the photograph of Gopinath. So great was the resemblance between Krishnachandra's face and the face in the photograph, that she could not help saying to her son, "When did you get this photograph taken?" He replied that it wasn't his photograph but that of Gopinath. But the mother did not believe him and told him that he was fooling her. Thereupon Gopinath's wife in a trembling voice and rather shyly, remarked, "Yes, that is the photograph of my husband. Your son resembles him very much. When I married him he looked exactly like your son. His voice and gestures are also like my husband's. Ever since your son began coming into my house, life has become happier not only for me, my daughter and for my mother-in-law, but for all our fellow mill-hands who live in this lane."

Pramila did not reply. But suddenly a cloud passed across her face. She seemed to see an evil dream and when she forcibly took her son away towards the door she felt as if somebody was wresting him from her hands. Then they rose to depart. As they were just getting out of the door, Gopinath's wife said to Pramila, "Please send your son now and again to our house for I am afraid, if I don't see him, I shall die."

6

After Khubchand's term of imprisonment was over, he returned home. When the ship, carrying him, touched Bombay there was nobody who seemed to know him, for he was changed out of all recognition. His back was bent, his brow was wrinkled, his teeth were gone, the hair of his head had turned grey and he had a long beard.

Nor did he wish to disclose his identity to anyone. He wondered if Pramila was still alive and, if so, how he was to find out where she was living. He, therefore, trudged along the road aimlessly. After some time he came to the building where his office used to be in the olden days. Near it was the small shop of a betel-leaf seller. Khubchand went up to the latter and asked, "Is this the office of Khubchand?"

The betel-seller replied, "It used to be. Now it is the office of the wealthy merchant Desraj."

"I have come to this city," said Khubchand, "after a very long time. I hear Khubchand was sentenced to a long imprisonment. Is it so?"

The betel-seller replied, "Yes, had he, however, tried he would have been acquitted, but he preferred to be honest and so suffered."

"What about his wife?"

"She is still living and now they have a son also."

Hearing about the son, Khubchand felt a new inrush of joy, hope and life.

"Where do they stay? I would like to meet them, for I ate Khubchand's salt for many years."

The betel-seller then directed Khubchand to the house of Pramila, and he wended his way there with winged feet.

Hardly had he gone a few steps when he saw a temple. At once he made for it and, entering the shrine, placed his head at the feet of the idol. Tears of gratitude to God welled up in his eyes. For truth to tell, he believed it was God who had held him in His encircling arms of love during his exile from home.

When a few minutes later Khubchand came out of the temple he experienced in his heart that peace which passeth understanding, the peace which he could not have when he lived in the lap of luxury. For, verily, the sun cannot be reflected clearly in turbid water.

Just when he emerged from the shrine a woman entered. Khubchand's heart gave a jump. It was Pramila. Everyday since his separation from her, he had remembered her and conjured up before his mind's eye an image of her. Today when he saw her in the flesh, he found in her an ascetic, who was afire with the love of God. He felt like falling at her feet and praying to her, "Oh Goddess, lift me from the dust!" But he was not quite sure if she would be able to recognise him, for during the interval his appearance had altered so much that it was very difficult for any one to identify him at first sight. He, therefore, waited for her till she came out of the temple, so that he followed her home.

Shortly afterwards when Pramila started going homewards, Khubchand followed her at a distance, till she entered a one-storeyed building and closed the door behind. He stopped short. While he was still wondering what to do, the door was flung open and a handsome-looking boy came out. No sooner did the boy see Khubchand than he was startled and he fell at his feet. Khubchand's heart sank within him, for the youth looked in every respect like Gopinath.

"Father, we were expecting you home today," said Krish-

nachandra on being raised by his father, "I was just going to fetch a carriage to take mother and me to the docks. You must have had great difficulty in finding out the house. Come in, father."

Khubchand followed Krishnachandra into the house. But he was not quite at ease, for he seemed to feel as if he were treading a bed of thorns. The face of Krishnachandra had revived the old sad memories of the strike and its sequel. Suddenly Krishnachandra stopped near the foot of the staircase and called out, "Mother, mother, father has come!" This touched the heart of the father, who embraced the son with deep affection.

7

One evening, a week after his return, when Khubchand was on the point of going to the temple to say his prayers, Gopinath's daughter, Binny, entered the house and, saluting Pramila, said, "Mother is not feeling well today, so she wants to see Krishnachandra." Pramila replied, "I am sorry, Binny, he cannot come today, for, you see, his father has come back."

Krishnachandra, who was in the next room, overheard the conversation and at once came out. "No, mother," said he, "I shall ask father to let me go to see Binny's mother. I promise I shall return quickly."

Pramila was rather amazed and burst out, "I don't know what spell Gopinath's family has cast on you that once you go to their house you don't think of coming back home at all." Krishnachandra, however, entreated her again to give him permission, but she refused. Thereupon Khubchand interceded and asked the mother to let the boy go.

After Krishnachandra and Binny had gone, Pramila said to her husband, "Krishnachandra looks so much like Gopinath that at times I have a fear lest he might meet with the same

fate which was meted out to Gopinath." Khubchand chimed in, "When I first saw him I, too, mistook him for Gopinath."

Pramila continued, "Gopinath's wife also says that Krishnachandra's temperament is also like that of Gopinath." Khubchand replied smilingly, "What sport of God is it that he whom I killed should have been re-born as my own son?" Then, looking into the eyes of his wife, he solemnly observed, "Well, whatever God does, is for our good, though we foolishly think when His will runs counter to our own that He is unjust. He is all-benevolent, all-good. It was this thought which sustained me in the Andamans. God is our only haven. But for His grace I do not know where the bark of my life would have been today. Perhaps it would have been still tossing up and down in the sea of misery."

8

Krishnachandra and Binny had hardly gone a few paces when the latter said, "I told you a lie that my mother was ill. She is perfectly alright. As you had not been to our place for so many days she asked me to call you. Of course, there is also some urgent matter about which she wished to consult you." Whereupon he inquired rather impatiently, "Consult me? What advice can I give? The reason why I have not been to your place last few days is, my father has returned home."

"Your father?" replied Binny, "Then he must have asked you when I came to call you, who I was."

"No, no, he did not ask anything."

"I am sure he must have considered me rather an impudent girl."

"My father is not that kind of man. On the contrary, had he known who you were he would have talked to you with

great love. I tell you, my father is the very embodiment of love. But, tell me, what is the matter about which your mother wishes to consult me?"

"What do I know about it? Had I known that your father had come back I would not have called at yours today. He must be thinking that it is not good for a grown-up girl like me to gad about."

Krishnachandra burst with laughter and answered impulsively, "Of course; and when I get back home I shall tell him something more about you."

Binny grew red in the face and retorted, "What will you tell him? Dô I gad about? You know very well that yours is the only house which I visit."

"I shall tell him whatever I like, otherwise tell me why your mother has called me."

Binny replied, "Tomorrow, perhaps, there will be a strike in our mill. You see, our Manager is so hard-hearted that if any one is five minutes late his wages for half the day are deducted. Several times we have appealed to him against this rigorous regulation, but in vain. Now my mother and her other fellow mill-hands are very keen on deputing you to the Manager to represent the matter once more to him on their behalf. If he refuses to relent, then of course we shall all down tools tomorrow."

Krishnachandra was absorbed in thought.

Binny continued, "The Manager thinks that we are helpless. That is why he does not come to terms. But we want to show him that even if we have to starve to death we shall not brook any injustice."

Krishnachandra remarked, "If you all strike, once again there will be firing and so many lives will be lost."

Binny replied unhesitatingly, "What does that matter? My father met his death that way; why should I be afraid of facing the bullets?"

By this time Binny's house was reached. Near the door, they saw a large number of mill-hands standing: no sooner did they see Krishnachandra than they all shouted with joy. "Our leader! Our leader!"

9

Krishnachandra had an interview with the Manager but it proved abortive. The workers, therefore, were compelled to strike work. Next day the compound of the mill was filled with the mill-hands. The Manager, fearing violence, sent for the military to guard the mill. The mill-hands had absolutely no intention of doing any harm to his person or property. But as soon as they saw soldiers on the scene they were excited.

Krishnachandra asked the men if they were determined to enter the mill even if in doing so, all of them were to be shot down dead.

"Yes, yes," a large majority of them replied with one voice.

"Those who have families," said Krishnachandra, "should, however, go back home."

Binny, who was standing behind him, exclaimed, "No, God will protect our families." Her words heartened those who were inclined till then to return home.

About a thousand mill-hands, then, began to march towards the gate of the mill. No sooner did the soldiers see them coming near them than they opened fire. Krishnachandra was the first to fall down dead. Soon a few others followed him. The men began to feel somewhat nervous.

Just then Khubchand, bareheaded and bare-footed, arrived on the scene. Seeing his son lying dead on the ground, he cried out, "Victory to Krishnachandra!" and embraced his son. This touching sight re-inforced courage in the minds of the wavering mill-hands.

A moment afterwards, however, Khubchand plucked up courage and addressed them, "Friends, my son was God's gift to me. Now He has taken that gift back. Congratulate me that my dear son has died the death of a hero. For, he alone is a hero who stands up bravely against injustice."

From a thousand throats went forth the cry, "Victory to Krishnachandra!" And then in a body the men began to move towards the Manager's office. The Manager raised his revolver, but seeing Khubchand standing in front he felt ashamed and said with a fallen face, "Sir, I am sorry for the mishap."

Khubchand signalled to the men to stop, and then turning to the Manager, replied calmly, "Whatever God does He does for our good. But if my son's sacrifice can help in any way in redressing the injustice done to the mill-hands, I shall consider myself truly fortunate."

Khubchand then asked him what he proposed doing. He replied, "You know, I am a mere executive. I can only carry out my masters' behests."

Thereupon Khubchand said rather sternly, "That is true. But if you feel that the men have been treated unjustly you must stand up for them, because to co-operate with those who inflict injustice amounts to their themselves doing that injustice."

The Manager then went into his office and arranged for an interview between Khubchand and the Directors. And while they were engaged in hitting upon a formula for satisfying

the strikers, the latter occupied themselves with arranging the details of Krishnachandra's funeral.

After some time Khubchand came out and informed the workers that the regulation for imposing fines had been withdrawn. They heard the decision rather indifferently because their hearts were heavy on account of the death of their dear friend and leader, Krishnachandra. He then instructed some of the men to lift the bier.

As they were raising the dead body, Pramila, maddened with grief, arrived there and embraced her son. The eyes of all were bedimmed with tears.

Khubchand placed his right hand on her shoulder and said, "Pray, don't weep. Our son has died in a manner for which we should, on the contrary, rejoice and thank God." She continued to cling to her son. She felt the light of her life had been put out. Her faith in God began to shake a little. Then turning to her husband she said, "You may believe that whatever God does is for our good, but I don't think so." So great was her sorrow that that very night she died of a broken heart. The son and the mother were cremated the same day.

Khubchand spent the remaining few years of his life in the service, with parental solicitude, of the larger family of labourers.

❁ STORY OF THE TWO BULLS

AMONG animals the ass is considered to be the most brainless. When we wish to name any one a first-class fool, we call him a donkey. It is rather difficult to determine whether the donkey is really so bereft of intelligence or whether its eminent position among the dullards is due to its simplicity and Job-like patience. The cow uses her horns in self-defence to strike another; the mother-cow, too, easily assumes on occasions the aspect of a lioness. The dog also is a very gentle-looking creature, but at times even it loses its temper. But the donkey has never been heard nor seen doing any such thing. Never does one see even a shadow of discontent on its face, even when it is beaten mercilessly or given dried grass to eat. In Spring it may jump once or twice with a springy step but no one has ever observed it expressing joy. A sort of standing sadness seems to cloud its countenance.

All the virtues of saints and sages have reached their apex in the ass. And yet man calls it a dunce. Such shameless disrespect for virtue is not seen elsewhere. Perhaps, simplicity is out of joint in the world of men. Look at the Indians in Africa, how they are being insulted. Why are Indians not allowed entry into America? These innocent folk do not drink; they do not pick up a quarrel with any one and they submit resignedly to browbeating; nay, they even stomach insult silently. And yet they are defamed on the plea that thereby they lower the standard of life or the ideal of civilization! Perhaps, if they had been trained in tit-for-tat tactics and knew how to answer bricks with brick-bats, they would

have been called 'civilized'. There is the example of Japan. One single victory has given her a place of honour and equality in the ranks of civilized nations.

But the donkey has also a younger brother, less assinine than himself. It is the bull. At times we use this term to describe some one dwelling in duncedom. In the opinion of some people, perhaps, the bullock is first in foolishness. But I respectfully differ from them. For at times the bullock does strike another; also, now and again, a restive bullock has been seen. Furthermore, it does manage to show its discontent through other diverse ways. Consequently, it occupies a lower place than the donkey in the scale of stupidity!

2

Jhuri, the gardener, had two bulls, named Hira and Moti. Both belonged to the Western stock and were handsome to look at, steadfast and skilful in service and tall in stature. An affectionate intimacy existed between them as a result of their living together for a long time under the same roof. Seated face to face or side by side they would exchange their thoughts with each other in silence. How one understood the thoughts of the other, we do not know. But, doubtless, they had some secret faculty whereby they did so—a faculty of which man, who claims to be the lord of creation, has been deprived. They expressed their mutual love by licking and smelling each other. Sometimes they would bring their horns into juxtaposition, not in any spirit of antipathy but of affection, just as when intimacy begins to grow between friends, they sometimes slap each other. Truly, without such expressiveness, friendship might lose all grace. Whenever Hira and Moti were yoked in a cart or a plough and they walked side by side with their necks swinging, it was the endeavour of each to bear the

maximum burden. At the end of the day, in the evening or in the afternoon when they were unyoked, they would smooth the strain of service by licking and loving each other. They would put their mouths into the feeding-trough and take them out together. They would also sit or stand simultaneously. If one turned away his face from the trough, the other also would do likewise.

As luck would have it, Jhuri once sent the pair to his father-in-law's house. The bulls did not know why they were being sent. They thought that their master had sold them to some one else. It may be that they disliked the idea of being sold. Anyhow, who can say whether they liked their being sold to another or not? But Gaya, Jhuri's brother-in-law, had the time of his life in driving the bulls home. If he drove them from behind they would run right and left; if they were driven by the rope from the head-side they would hang their horns low and bellow. If they had been given by Providence the power of speech, they would have asked Jhuri, "Why are you turning us out of your home? We have not left any nerve unstrained to serve you. Nevertheless, if you were not satisfied with us, you could have exacted still more work from us. We would gladly accept dying in harness in your service. We have never complained to you about the food supplied to us. Whatever food you gave us, we ate in all humility. Then, why did you sell us to this tyrant, Gaya?"

It was evening when Hira and Moti reached their new destination. They had had no food all day and so felt hungry, but when they were taken to the feeding-trough neither of them put his mouth in it. Their hearts were very heavy, for they had been separated from a house, which they had considered their own. They felt like strangers in a strange land.

They consulted each other in their mute language. Then they looked askance and went to bed. When the whole village was asleep, they broke asunder their tethers and ran homewards. The tethers were so strong that none could ever suspect that even a bull would ever be able to snap them; but they had their energy redoubled at that time and so with one jerk they achieved their object.

3

When Jhuri awoke in the morning he saw that Hira and Moti were standing near the feeding-trough. From the neck of each was hanging a tether in shreds, their legs were mud-soiled up to the knees and their eyes glared with defiant love. He was beside himself with joy. He immediately ran towards them and embraced them and kissed them. It was a charming and touching sight, indeed.

Presently, the boys of the whole village foregathered there and welcomed Hira and Moti with continuous clapping. Though such an event was not peculiar in the history of the village, it had a striking character of its own. The Children's Association resolved to present an address of welcome to them. Some brought loaves from their homes, others fetched bran, molasses and husk.

One of them observed: "No one else has such fine bulls."

Another child exclaimed, "And they came back home from such a long distance all alone!"

A third remarked, "They are not mere bulls. they must have been human beings in their previous births."

None dared to say anything against this thesis.

Jhuri's wife, however, was incensed when she saw the two bulls at the door of the house and shouted, "What faithless

brutes! They did not work even for a single day at my mother's and ran back home."

Jhuri could not bear this insult of his wife to the beasts and observed, "They are not unfaithful. It must have been that they had no fodder to eat, so they had no other alternative."

The wife replied with a superior air of self-importance, "So you are the one who knows how to feed animals; others, I suppose, feed them on water."

Jhuri teased her, "Had they got their feed, why should have they run away from your father's?"

His wife answered in a rage, "The bulls came back because my family people do not show so much indulgence to beasts as you people do here. They feed them, but also make them work very hard. Your bulls were shirkers, so they scampered away. No more oil-cake and bran for them now. They shall have nothing but dry husk. Let them eat it or die."

So she instructed the servant to give to the bulls only the barest rations. When they put their mouths in the trough, they found the feed tasteless, without any oiliness or juiciness. As a consequence they did not eat it and began to look hopelessly towards the door.

Jhuri, who saw all this going on, said to the servant, "Look here, why do you not give them a little oilcake?"

"If I did," he answered, "the mistress would beat me to death."

"Then do it without her knowledge."

"No, sir, for afterwards you, too, will take her side."

Next day Jhuri's brother-in-law came again and took away the bulls. This time they were yoked in a cart. Three or four times Moti thought of sidetracking the cart into a ditch by

the roadside, but Hira, who was more forbearing than his fellow and friend, pulled him up. On reaching home Gaya tied up both of them with thick ropes and thus made them suffer the consequences of their mischief of yesterday. He gave them dried grass to eat, while his own bulls had their full feed of oilcake and bran.

Never before had Hira and Moti been insulted in this manner. Jhuri had not even once in his life touched them with a stick, for they would run fast at his mere 'Hullo!' But in the house of Gaya they were beaten. They were already suffering the pain of humiliation while their getting mere dried grass for food made matters worse. So they did not so much as raise their eyes towards the trough.

On the following day, Gaya yoked them into the plough. But Hira and Moti had sworn not to stir, come what may. He lashed them till he grew tired, but they were adamant. Then once he beat Hira mercilessly on the nose. Moti's anger knew no bounds. He ran away with the plough and broke it and the ropes into bits. If they had not long ropes around their necks, they could never have been caught.

Hira said to Moti in his mute language, "It is useless to run away."

Moti replied in the same language, "He had almost killed you. Now he will lash us still more relentlessly."

"That may be," said Hira, "but since we were born as bulls how long could we expect to escape beating?"

Gaya chased them along with two of his servants, each of whom had a stick in his hand.

Moti, eyeing them, said to Hira, "There he is coming along with a stick. If you agree, I would like Gaya to feel my strength."

Hira persuaded his friend not to do anything of the kind but simply to stand up.

"If he beats me," replied Moti, "I shall certainly trip over one or two of them."

"No, please do not, that is not the tradition of our tribe." Poor Moti writhed in agony.

Just then Gaya arrived on the scene and drove them away homeward. Fortunately this time he did not give them any hiding, otherwise Moti would have retaliated. But Gaya and his assistants, seeing the wrinkles of wrath on Moti's forehead, at once realised, that discretion was the better part of valour.

Once again they were given dry husk for food, but they stood stock-still. The inmates of the house sat down to dinner. Just then a young girl, with two loaves in her hands, came from within and put them into the mouths of Hira and Moti and then ran back inside. Of course these were not sufficient to satisfy their hunger. But in their heart of hearts they felt as if they had been adequately fed, because they realised that even in their new place they had some one who was considerate towards them. The girl was Bhairu's daughter. She had lost her mother long ago, and had a step-mother who was very unkind to her. The result was that she felt a kinship with the bulls.

During the day they would be yoked and when restive they would be lashed. In the evening they were tied up and at night the girl would feed them on two loaves of bread. Such was the miracle wrought by the girl's gift of love that though Moti and Hira after eating the two loaves look merely one or two mouthfuls of the dry husks, they did not grow weak. All the same their eyes were flushed with the fury of revenge.

One day Moti said to Hira, "Hira, it is impossible to go on bearing all this any longer."

"What do you, then, propose to do?" asked Moti.

"I feel like lifting one of the family on my horns and then throwing him down in the dust."

"But think of that dear girl, who feeds us every day on loaves. She is the daughter of the master of the house. If you do any harm to her father or mother, she will become an orphan. Have you thought of that?"

"I shall throw down the mistress, who is the step-mother of the girl and who beats her so often."

"But you forget that to use our horns against a woman is prohibited in our community."

"You always oppose me whenever I talk to you of making an escape. Then, come, today let us break the ropes which bind us."

"Agreed. But how shall we be able to snap such thick ropes?"

"I shall show you how to do it. First, chew a portion of it in your mouth; and then it would break at one jerk."

At night, when the girl had departed, Moti and Hira began to chew their ropes. But in spite of their efforts, they could not grip them between the teeth; they were so thick.

Suddenly the door of the house flew open and the girl came out. Both of them hung their heads low and began to lick her hands. Their tails stood up straight. She stroked their foreheads and said, "I shall untie the ropes for you. Run away quickly, otherwise the people here will beat you to death. Today they were consulting each other about putting nose-strings through your nostrils."

She then undid their ropes. But both of them stood motionless.

Moti asked Hira, "Why do you not move?"

Hira replied, "We can, no doubt. But on the morrow the poor girl will come into trouble because they will suspect her."

All of a sudden the girl cried out, "Father, Father, uncle's bulls are running away, chase them."

Gaya came out greatly agitated and pursued the animals. But the faster he followed them the faster they ran; so he raised a hue and cry. He then retraced his steps towards the village to collect a few men. This gave to the bulls an opportunity to escape. They ran on straight, oblivious of the familiar route, and so were soon off the track. Suddenly they realised that they had come to some new village. So they stopped short on the fringe of a farm to consult each other as to what they should do.

Hira said, "It appears we have missed the way."

"You ran so aimlessly. You should have thrown him over," replied Moti.

"If we had done that what would the world have said? He may give up his religion of humanity but we cannot."

Both were feeling very uneasy on account of hunger. There were peas in the farm. So they began to eat these. Now and again they would look up to see if any one was coming there.

After they have had their fill and had enjoyed their first flush of freedom, they began to frisk and frolic. They belched boisterously. Then in play they brought their horns side by side and tried to shove each other. Moti forced back Hira step by step till at last the latter fell into a ditch. Thereupon Hira got angry. But he stood up again and engaged himself in another bout. When Moti saw that playsomeness was leading on to provocation, he withdrew himself to the edge of the pea-field.

4

All of a sudden a huge bull—the very picture of bovine strength,—puffed up with pride, was seen coming along. Soon he came up to them. Hira and Moti first looked askance at the visitor, then they found themselves on the horns of a dilemma. To oppose this monstrous enemy would be to court certain death; nor did mere standing still on their part ensure escape. What an awful and unenviable situation to be in!

Moti then said mutely to Hira, "What a mess we are in! Can you suggest a way to get out of it?"

Hira replied thoughtfully, "The brute has a swelled head. He will not listen to any entreaty of ours."

"Then why should we not run away?"

"That would be cowardice."

"Then let us stay where we are and prepare to die here."

"But if he makes us run?"

"We must consider then."

"There is only one way out. Let us both attack him at the same time. I shall press him from front, while you do it from behind. In this way he will be brought to bay and so would be compelled to run. And when he moves towards me you strike him sideways in the stomach with your horns. Our lives are in danger."

Both the friends, at the peril of their lives, then sprang upon the bull. Now this monster has never had any experience of fighting like this before. He had been used to single combats. No sooner did the bull turn back in the direction of Moti than Hira pressed him from his side. The enemy, however, had hoped to dispose of with ease Hira and Moti individually but they were too clever for him to be caught in his trap. At one time, in a fit of fury, he made for Hira, hoping

to do away with him straight off, when Moti sidled up and struck him in the stomach with his horns. The bull beat a retreat when Hira attacked him from the rear. Being wounded and helpless he ran away in despair while Hira and Moti chased him far afield, till out of sheer exhaustion he dropped down on the ground. They then gave up the pursuit.

Both the friends were intoxicated with victory.

Moti said in his "shorthand" and silent language to Hira "I had a great desire to kill the fellow outright."

Hira reprehended him and replied, "One should never attack the enemy once he is down."

"All that is a delusion. One should beat him down to his knees so that he may not get up again."

"First, let us have something to eat before we ponder over that problem."

In front of them there was a pea-field. At once Moti entered it, despite Hira's dissuasion. But hardly had he begun to eat when they both were hemmed in by two men armed with sticks, who came up running there. Hira was on the border of the field, so he escaped. Moti was in the midst of a watered tract, so his hoofs sank more and more in the mud as he struggled to run away. So he was caught. When Hira saw that his friend was in trouble he returned to the field saying, "If we are caught we shall both be caught together." The watchman, therefore, got round him, too.

Early next morning, Hira and Moti were shut up in the cattle-pound.

5

For the first time in their lives Moti and Hira had an experience of being without a single straw the whole day. They could not understand the ways of their new master. Gaya,

they thought, was better than this man. In the compound there were several buffaloes and goats, horses and donkeys, but none of them has had hay. They lay as if dead on the ground. Some were so weak that they could not even stand up straight. All the time Hira and Moti were looking intently towards the door but nobody appeared there. At last, driven to despair, they started licking the saltish clay of the wall, but this did not satisfy them.

At night, too, when they did not get anything to eat, Hira's heart was afire with animosity and he said to Moti, "Moti, I cannot stand this starvation any longer."

Moti replied with a drooping head, "I fear the end has come."

"Do not lose heart so soon, Moti. We shall yet find out a way to escape from here."

"Let us pull down the wall."

"I have no strength to do that."

"Is that all the strength you used to boast of so often?"

"My pride is now in the dust."

The wall of the enclosure was jerry-built. Hira, who was sufficiently strong, pressed it hard with his curved horns till a layer of it fell down. This encouraged him to go on and consequently he attacked the wall repeatedly, bringing down some clay each time.

Just then the watchman of the cattle-pound, carrying a lantern in his hand, came there to take stock of the inmates. Seeing the audacious mischief which Hira had wrought he beat him severely and tied him with a still stronger rope.

Moti, who lay on the ground, exclaimed, "Is that the only upshot of your efforts?"

"At least I had a chance of using all my strength."

"But what is the use of such trial of strength when it leads only to a more severe beating or bondage?"

"Come what may, however, I shall continue pulling down the wall."

"Then before long you will have to repent and rue for your life."

"I do not care at all. The present bondage is worse than death. Suppose the wall were pulled down, how many lives could be saved? So many of our brothers are shut up here. They are almost dead of hunger. If this continues for three or four days more, we shall all perish."

"That is true. Then come. I shall co-operate with you in beating down the wall." At once Moti pressed the weakened wall with his horns. At first, a little clay fell down. He was heartened. And before long he was seen struggling against the wall as if he were fighting for his life. After a couple of hours' persistent pushing the upper portion, about a foot in height, fell down. He redoubled his strength and presently half the wall was brought to the ground.

When this happened the half-dead inmates felt an inrush of new life. First, the three mares made for the door, then followed the goats. But the donkeys remained rooted to the spot.

Hira, rather surprised, asked them, "Why do you not run away?"

One of the donkeys replied, "Lest we might be caught again."

"What then? But now is the time to run away."

"We are rather afraid, so we prefer to be where we are."

It was past midnight. Both the donkeys still stood pondering whether or not to go away while Moti was engaged in snapping his friend's rope. But when he failed, Hira remarked, "Let me stay on here. You had better go. We might meet again some day."

Moti's eyes were bedimmed with tears and he said, "Do you think me to be so selfish? We have been together so long. And today when you are in trouble, how could I leave you in the lurch?"

Hira replied, "We shall have a more severe hiding then, because they would smell that it is all your mischief."

Moti answered back proudly, "If for the same reason for which you have been bound down, I have to suffer, I do not mind. At least, nine to ten brothers of ours who had their liberty restored to them through our efforts, would bless us."

He then drove the donkeys out with his horns and stood by the side of his friend.

It is needless to describe what happened the next morning when the clerk of the cattle-pound, his assistants and the watchman came into the compound. Suffice it to say that Moti had a good beating and he was tied down with a still thicker rope.

For one week Hira and Moti remained bound in the cattle-pound, but no one gave them even a wisp of hay to eat. They had, however, some water to drink once a day. Both of them, consequently, had become so weak that their bones were seen sticking out.

One day, in front of the cattle-pound, there was drum-beating and by afternoon about fifty to sixty persons foregathered there. Hira and Moti were taken out for inspection and whosoever examined them turned away, as his heart sank

within him when he saw their pitiable, physical condition. Suddenly a man with a beard, whose eyes were bloodshot, whose mien was cruel, turned up there and, fingering Hira and Moti in the sides, began to talk to the clerk of the cattle-pound. They shuddered at his sight for they inwardly divined the reason of his examining them in that manner. They looked at each other with frightened eyes and hung low their heads.

Hira exclaimed, "We ran away in vain from Gaya's house. Now there is no hope at all of our being spared."

Moti observed despairingly, "They say, God is merciful to all. Why does not His mercy descend on us?"

"To Him it is all the same whether we live or die. Well, now we shall live with Him for a few days. Once He came to our rescue in the form of that girl. Will He save us now?"

"This man will butcher us, you will see."

"What then? Even in that case our flesh, bones, skin and horns will be put to some use."

After the auction they followed their new master. They were shaking with fear to the very bones, so much so that they could not lift their feet from the ground. But knowing that if they slackened their pace in the least they would be beaten, they moved on, now stumbling and now getting up again.

On the way a herd of cows and bulls was seen grazing in a green pasture-ground. They seemed so smug and self-satisfied, smooth and sleek. Some jumped with joy, others frisked about. They were very happy, indeed, but so selfish. For, they did not care to know how miserable their "fellows," Hira and Moti, were in the clutches of the butcher.

Suddenly Hira and Moti felt that the road they were treading was familiar to them. For, it was along this very road

that Gaya had led them. There were the same garden, the same field and the same village. Every moment now they sped up their pace. All their fatigue disappeared. Lo! they were back again in their old pasturage.

Presently they sighted the well at which they used to work.

Moti remarked, "Our house is now near."

Hira observed, "God be praised!"

"I shall now make for the house."

"But will he let you go?"

"No, no, let us run home. Once we are there, we shall not move forward at all."

Accordingly, mad with joy and frisking like calves, they ran on homeward till they stopped in front of their stalls. The butcher followed them at their heels.

Jhuri was sitting in the door and basking in the sun. No sooner did he see the bulls than he got up and embraced them again and again. Hira and Moti's eyes were filled with tears of gladness.

One of them began to lick his hand.

The butcher went up and seized the bulls by the rope. Thereupon Jhuri said, "They are my bulls."

"How can they be yours? I have bought them at an auction from the cattle-pound."

"How could you buy them unless I were to sell them? Who has a right to auction my bulls? They are stolen property. So I advise that you had better go away quietly."

"I shall report to the Police Station."

"They are my bulls. The proof of this is that they are standing in front of my door."

The butcher, infuriated, moved towards the bulls in order to take them away by force, when Moti struck him with his horn. He retreated while the latter pursued him till at last he began to run. Moti still chased him and stopped only when he reached the outskirts of the village. The butcher stood there in the distance; now threatening him, now abusing him, now slinging stones at him. But Moti, like the conquering hero, blocked the butcher's path. The villagers saw this and burst into laughter. At last defeated and downcast, the butcher went back home and Moti returned at a strutting pace.

Hira said, "Moti, you are wonderful! I was all the time afraid lest in anger you would kill him."

"If he had touched me," said Moti, "I would have done so."

"Now he will never come here again," said Hira.

"If he comes I shall let him have a taste of my strength."

"I shall be dead, but at least of no use to him."

"No one thinks that we too have life."

"It is because we are so simple-hearted."

Before long the trough was filled with bran, grain, husk and oil-cake, and both the friends began to eat them with gusto. Jhuri stood praising them, while a crowd of village boys watched the scene. The whole village seemed full of joy.

Just then the mistress of the house came out and kissed both the bulls on their foreheads.

NO one knew who Laila was, whence she had come and what she did. Then one day the people of Tehran heard a maiden of matchless beauty singing with swaying zest to the accompaniment of a tambourine, in the square, this verse from a song of Hafiz:

*"I have heard the glad tidings that the days of sorrow
would not last long. Some of them have already sped
away, the rest, too, will be soon no more."*

And the whole city went mad after her. Such was Laila. To visualise her grace of form, one will have to conjure up before his mind's eye the radiant glow of dawn when the blue sky is bathed in gold, and the springtime when in the garden flowers of diverse hues are in bloom and the nightingales are singing. To have an idea of the melody of her voice one will have to recall either the continuous sound of the tinkling of the bells around the necks of camels, which is heard in the stillness of the night or the strains of the reed of a shepherd, who is reclining under the shade of a tree, heard in the drowsy silence of mid-day.

Whenever Laila sang in ecstasy a heavenly light shone forth on her face. She was an embodiment of poetry and song, of the fragrance and felicity of love, before whom the heads of the young and the old, the rich and the poor, swayed as if spell-bound. For, she brought to them the tidings of the happy times, of that future when concord and contentment would reign in the country, free from antagonism of every kind. She would as if awaken the ruler to his responsibilities and seem

to say to him, "How long will you go on enjoying this pleasure and this power?" She would as if awaken the dormant desires of the people and with her song strike the chords of their hearts. She would sing to them of the fame and fate of those immortal heroes who had been shaken by the cries of the poor of the greatness of those who had sacrificed their all for others. Her ineffable songs charmed her hearers and stirred them deeply. To the downtrodden, she was the light of hope; to the aesthete and the artist, the *houri* (damsel) of heaven; to the rich, the awakened conscience; to those in power, the living appeal for duty and divine mercy. At a mere lifting of her eye-brows, they would have been prepared to plunge into the fire. As consciousness attracts matter, so did Laila, the people of Teheran.

She was pure as nectar, stainless as snow and above reproach like the blossom. At a mere glance of her piercing love, at her mysterious smile, or at her musical voice, mountains of gold would rise up, kings bow in worship, States lick the dust of her feet; poets vie with one another and scholars bend their knees. But Laila would not even look athwart anyone. She lived under the shade of a tree, feeding on alms and singing the songs of her heart. Like a poet's creation, she was an expression of joy, not an object of abject enjoyment. She was the blessings of the sages incarnate, so deeply dyed in peace and goodwill was she. She was beyond the temptation of any one's touch and treasure.

2

One evening Prince Nadir, of Teheran, who was on horseback, passed by the square. She was singing at that time. He reined in his horse and stood for a long while listening in a state of self-forgetfulness to her song, the opening words of which were:—

"In my heart there is anguish; if I express it my tongue burns, and if I do not, I have a fear that all my bones will be reduced to ashes."

He then dismounted and, squatting himself on the ground, wept with his head hung low. He, however, soon pulled himself up and going up to Laila, placed his head at her feet. At once, out of deference to him, the people stood aside. She asked him, "Who are you?"

Nadir: "Your slave."

Laila: "What do you want?"

Nadir: "Your order to serve you, and the favour of your gracing my cottage with your presence."

Laila: "That is not my way and wont."

The Prince once again sat down, while Laila resumed her song. But there was a lump in her throat as if a string of the *Veena* (a stringed musical instrument) had snapped. Looking at the Prince with gracious eyes she asked him not to sit there. Thereupon some of the people said to her, "Laila, he is our Prince." She answered indifferently, "I am so glad to hear that. But what have princes to do in this place? They have their palaces, concerts and bouts of wine. But I sing to those who have pain in their hearts, and not for those who have passion and are pleasure-bent."

The Prince replied, as if intoxicated, "Laila, for a single strain of your song I am ready to renounce my all. I was till now a slave of passion, but today you have made me taste of pain."

Laila again began to sing, but she had no control over her voice, and as if it was with some one else's throat that she was singing.

Laila lifted her tambourine on her shoulders and wended her way towards her abode. The listeners repaired to their

respective homes. A few, however, followed her up to the tree, in the shadow of which she dwelt. But when she reached the door of her hut, they, too, dispersed, except one man who stood silently at a few paces away from it. Laila asked him who he was.

Nadir: "Your slave."

Laila: "Do you not know that I do not admit any one into the privacy of my retreat!"

Nadir: "That is quite obvious."

Laila: "Then, why are you here?"

Nadir: "Because of the pull of hope."

After a while Laila asked him if he had had something to eat.

Nadir replied, "Now I have neither hunger nor thirst."

Laila: "Come along, today let me invite you to the poor man's frugal fare so that you may have a taste of it."

Nadir could not refuse. He entered the hut and feasted on the bread made of millet. He began to think that in this vast world there is endless joy. He was experiencing the blossoming of his heart in love. After he had finished, Laila said, "It is past midnight; now you had better go back home."

Nadir replied with tears in his eyes, "No, Laila, from now, my abode too will be here."

Nadir would follow Laila wherever, during the day, she went singing, in the streets and on the roads. At night he would go to sleep under the tree. The King, the Queen, the officers and court dignitaries, all begged of him to leave Laila alone, but he would not. He lived in the same ascetic state as Laila. The Queen would send sumptuous food for him, but Nadir did not even so much as look at it.

But there was no longer that ambrosial air in Laila's singing. Her song was now like the strains of an instrument the strings of which are broken; for in it there was neither magic nor melody, nor the electric effectiveness of old. She would sing, no doubt, even now to a large number of listeners, but more to please them than to express the joy of her soul; and they, too, would foregather for her sake, rather than because they were drawn against their own will, by the magnetism of her music.

Six months sped by in this way.

One day Laila did not go out of her home to sing when Nadir said, "Laila, why are you not going out today to sing?"

Laila: "No more shall I sing. Tell me honestly if nowadays you relish my singing as you did before."

Nadir: "More than ever."

Laila: "But the others do not like it at all."

Nadir: "Yes, I too, have been wondering at their lack of interest and enjoyment."

Laila: "There is nothing at all to be surprised at that. Formerly, my heart was open to all, in it there was room for every one, and it could please them. And its voice penetrated their hearts. But now you have closed the door of my heart on them and you alone are its occupant today. Consequently, my song pleases you only. This heart is no longer of any use to others. So far you were my slave; from now I shall be your bondsman, who will follow you everywhere. From today you are my lord. Just set fire to my hut and I shall throw my tambourine into the flames."

Today all Teheran is agog with joy, because Prince Nadir has brought home Laila as his wife. At long last his heart's

desire had been fulfilled. The people were devoted to him and so shared in his happiness. Though the king had issued a proclamation that on this happy occasion his subjects should not waste their time and wealth, but, instead, assemble in the mosques and invoke God's blessings of long life and health on the bride and the bridegroom, yet so great was their affection for their Prince that the people could not refrain from exhibiting their extravagance. The rich arranged for illumination and parties and music of the band; even the poor took up their tambourines and danced with delight on the roads.

In the evening the dignitaries and the wealthy foregathered in the audience-hall in the palace to offer their felicitations to the Prince, who stood before them, decked with jewels, fragrant with scents and abloom with the buoyancy of the spirit. The priest, then, prayed, "May God's blessings descend on Your Royal Highness!" And they all responded, "Amen!" The women of the town, too, came there to congratulate Laila, who was clad very simply and without a single ornament on her body. One of them exclaimed, "May your marriage be abundantly blessed!" And from thousands of throats emerged, "Amen!"

4

Several years passed. Nadir was now the King and Laila, the Queen. They administered the affairs of the State with exceptional efficiency. Both of them desired the true welfare of their subjects. Love obviated all those obstacles which Laila had at one time feared. He always represented the interests of the officials, while she stood up for the people, but because of give and take between them that difference in their outlook and advocacy did not present any material difficulty in administration. Their married life was an ideal one, marked by

mutual considerateness for each other. During their respite from the work of government they would spend their time in music or in boat-trips on the river or in reciting the poems of Hafiz. Laila had not now as much simplicity as before, nor had Nadir as much love for etiquette. The latter was Laila's sole lord, that was obvious, but what was unusual was Laila's overlordship. Whereas formerly in the palaces there were wives by dozens and scores, Laila was now the only Queen. To-day the royal mansions were being used for schools, libraries and dispensaries. Against the annual expenditure of crores of rupees on the palaces in the past, at present only a few thousands were spent. All this retrenchment was due to Laila, the amount saved being diverted to ends conducive to commonweal. No doubt Nadir was the king, but all power was in Laila's hands.

Notwithstanding, the people were not contented. On the contrary, their discontent deepened daily. The officials were afraid that if this state of affairs continued, the throne might be thrown into the dust. The tree planted by Jamshed, which had for centuries withstood storm and rain, was now in danger of being uprooted by the delicate but devilish hands of a beautiful woman. On the other hand, all the hopes of the democrats had been doomed to disappointment and they predicted that before it achieved any progress the State would perish. They said that while the world was flying in the aeroplanes they hesitated to sit even in a trolley, lest its motion might cause an earthquake! Both parties, consequently, were at loggerheads. Neither Nadir's pleading had any effect on the ruling class, nor was Laila's persuasion of any avail with the people's leaders. For, the former was thirsting for the blood of the King and the latter had turned the inveterate foes of the Queen.

5

There was discontent everywhere and so the hearts of the people were aflame with anger and opposition. But in the palace love and peace still reigned supreme, and the Queen and the King were absorbed in compassing the happiness and contentment of their subjects.

It was night. Nadir and Laila were engaged in a game of chess in their pleasure-house, which was bare of all decorations except a floor-cloth.

Nadir, seizing the hand of Laila, said, "Stop, you cannot encroach: you have had your move. Look, here goes your foot-soldier."

Laila: "I see, that is your plan. Well, all your foot-soldiers will not stand you in any stead, for I will kill your king. That is a poor beast!"

Nadir: "I enjoy defeat at your hands more than victory."

Laila: "You think as if you are humouring to me, eh! Well, beware betimes lest I inflict another defeat on you."

Nadir (with apparent firmness): "Is that so? Then, come along. You have insulted my king; at one stroke I shall do away with all your foot-soldiers."

Laila: "Well, I am not going to be lenient again, I tell you. Next time I will not let you off so easily."

Nadir: "I have no fears at all, as long as I have the king's horse."

Laila: "Here goes your horse, too; now, do you accept defeat?"

Nadir: "Yes, beloved, now I own defeat. But what does it matter! If your beauty had conquered me already, how could my king escape?"

6

Suddenly one day there was a crescendo of noise in front of the palace-door. Presently it was discovered that a large number of people, well equipped with arms, were striving to shatter down the walls. It was feared that the anger-maddened mob might make an entry any moment. Some were seen climbing up the ladders to gain the top of the walls. Laila stood there silent with her head hung low in shame and remorse. Were they the very people to articulate whose woes her voice used to wax fervent? And were they the same helpless, hunger-ridden, woe-begone, weak, oppressed and unjustly treated people for whose sake she had sacrificed herself!

Nadir, too, stood there motionless and mute, not with shame, but with indignation. His face was red, his eyes shot forth sparks, his lips quivered and over and over again he put his hand on the hilt of his sword but did not draw it. He looked repeatedly with wrath at Laila. A sign from him and his troops could have routed the rebels as the storm drives away the leaves. But he could not see eye to eye with her. the troops. What do you say?"

At last he said impatiently to Laila, "I want to call out

Laila replied very humbly, "Just wait a while please. First, ask them what they want."

Accordingly, accompanied by her, he went up on the terrace and both faced the people squarely. In the light of torches they looked like denizens from heaven. From thousands of throats came forth the cry, "There is Laila, there." And yet these were those very persons who in the past used to go mad at her songs.

Nadir addressed them in a loud voice, "O you unfortunate subjects of Persia, why have you surrounded the palace? Are you not afraid of me and your God? Are you not aware

that at a single glance of mine I can make you all one with the dust? I order you to go away within a moment, otherwise by God, a stream of blood will gush forth presently."

One of them who appeared to be the ring-leader of the rebels, stepped forward and answered, "We shall not budge from here until Laila has been banished from the palace."

Nadir was in a rage and said, "You ungrateful fellows, fear God, are you not ashamed of showing such disrespect to your Queen? Ever since she became the queen how many concessions has she made to you? Have you forgotten all those? Though she is your Queen, ye fools, she eats the same food which you throw to your dogs and wears the same sort of clothes which you give away to the beggars. Enter her apartments and you will find them as bereft of decoration as your own huts. She lives like an ascetic. She is all the time engrossed in your service. You should, therefore, besmear your foreheads with the dust of her feet and make it your eyes' collyrium. Never before had Persia a queen so devoted to the welfare of the poor, a sharer in their woes and one who had sacrificed herself for their sake. And of her you are talking this tomfoolery? I know now that you are without a sense of humanity and honour. You deserve only to be trampled upon under foot and your necks to be chopped off with a blunt knife."

Hardly had he finished speaking when with one voice the rebels exclaimed, "Laila is our enemy. We can never accept her as our Queen."

Nadir cried out at the top of his voice, "Be quiet for a moment. Look here. This is the order, on which Laila has just obtained my signature, which reduces the agricultural tax by half, thus cutting down your annual dues to the State to the tune of five crores of rupees."

They shouted back, "That tax should have been abolished long ago. We are not in a position to pay a single penny. Well, we cannot own allegiance to Laila as our Queen." At this Nadir shook with rage. But Laila said to him with tear-laden eyes, "If it is the will of the people that once again I should go about singing to the accompaniment of my tambourine, I have no objection. I am sure that I could re-conquer their hearts through my songs."

Nadir replied wrathfully, "Laila, I am not a slave of the people's idiosyncrasies. Before I part with you the streets of Teheran will be red with their blood. I want to read them a lesson for their revolt." He then ascended the minaret and rang the danger bell, which reverberated throughout the city. But not a single soldier appeared on the scene. He rang the bell again and though the sky and the stars shook at its sound, yet it had no effect at all on the military. For the third time he rang the bell, and the only response was a feeble echo as if it were the sound of a dying man's prayer.

Nadir struck his forehead in despair. He realized that he had fallen on evil days. He could have still saved the kingdom if he were to send away Laila as the rebels demanded, but she was dearer to him than life. He descended and, taking her by the hand, walked out of the principal gate of the palace. The rebels welcomed them with shouts of victory but moved aside under the stress of some mysterious impulse.

Silently Nadir and Laila passed through the streets of Teheran. It was dark on all sides. The shops were shut. There was silence everywhere. Not a single soul was abroad. The beggars, too, had taken shelter in the mosques. But Nadir and Laila had no place where they could lay their heads. He had a sword in his waist-belt, she had a tambourine in her hand—the only relics of their faded glory.

7

A year sped by. Laila and Nadir tramped through various countries, Baghdad and Halab, Samarkand and Bukhara, Kahra and Aden. Once again Laila's tambourine began to work wonders. On hearing her voice there would be excitement in the town, a crowd would collect in no time and accord her a warm welcome. But these two pilgrims did not stay anywhere longer than a day, nor would they beg anything of any one. They would eat whatever they got and at night sleep sometimes under a tree, at other times in a cave or by the roadside. The world's cruel treatment towards them had embittered them and so they ran miles away from its attractions. They had realized that it was no use forming attachment for any one in this world because those for whose sake you lay down your life turn ultimately your enemy and goodness is rewarded with evil. They received everywhere invitations from the *elite* of the town, nay, they were repeatedly pressed to be the latter's guest even for a day, but Laila refused every one. Nadir, however, was now and again haunted by a craving for the crown and by a desire to recruit soldiers secretly with a view to invading Teheran and defeating the rebels. But Laila's listlessness discouraged him so much that he would even hesitate to meet any one and talk it over with him. And she being his heart's sovereign, he followed in her footsteps.

In Persia, on the other hand, there was anarchy. Every-day there were fights between the ruling class, who had gathered forces, and the people. For a year the plough had not been plied, there was a severe famine in the country, commerce had slackened and the State treasury was empty. The power of the plutocrat increased daily, whereas that of the proletariat was on the wane. At last the people laid down their arms and the nobles had the reins of Government. The leaders of the

people were hanged, many more were sentenced to imprisonment and thus the wind was taken out of the sails of the masses. At such a time those who were advocates of power for the people remembered Nadir, for they have had a proof of the fact that they lacked the capacity for Popular Government. As a matter of fact, this was self-evident. It was Royalty who alone could uplift the country. Further, Laila and Nadir were now not likely to have much love for the people. They might be on the throne but yet they would be pulled like marionettes by the nobles who would thus get an opportunity to maltreat the people to their heart's content. They, therefore, consulted among themselves and deputed their representatives to Nadir to request him to return to the country.

8

It was evening. Laila and Nadir were sitting under a tree in Damascus. The blue edge of the mountain peaks against the sunset glow gave the impression of a faded lotus. Laila was wistfully looking at the beauty of Nature. Nadir, as if grown weary of life, was lying full length and eagerly eyeing the far-off frontier.

Suddenly in the distance, a cloud of dust was descried, and for a moment it appeared as if some men on horseback were coming there. Nadir got up and began to look closely to find out who the visitors were. Then he stood straight. His face brightened up as if it were a lighted lamp and new life was infused in his worn-out body. And with great animation he said, "Laila, by God, they are men from Persia; their very dress declares that."

Laila looked up and thoughtfully remarked, "You had better keep ready your sword, you might require it."

Nadir: "No, Laila, the people of Persia are not so mean as to lay their hands on their King."

Laila: "That is what I, too, used to think."

The horsemen drew near and, dismounting, respectfully saluted Nadir. Despite his efforts to control his emotions, he ran towards them and embraced them affectionately. He was, he said to himself, now not their king, but a traveller from Persia. His kingship had vanished but his patriotism still coursed in his veins. They were the three dispensers of Persia's destiny. He knew them very well and he had on several occasions tested their loyalty to him. He asked them to sit with him on his gunny-cloth, but they sat on the ground, for, in their estimation, that gunny-cloth was their king's golden throne to which they could have no access. Conversations began. The condition of Persia was critical. There was neither any administration, nor any administrator. Loot was the order of the day. If this sorry state of affairs continued the country would very soon be under foreign yoke, the people were all seeking Nadir; because none else except him could save the sinking ship. In this hope, they had sent their representatives to him.

Nadir replied as if in disgust, "Once you have insulted me; now do you want to take my life? I am quite comfortable here. Please do not worry me."

The nobles began to expostulate with him, "We shall not leave the hem of your garment. We shall put a knife on our necks in your presence and offer ourselves as a sacrifice at your feet. Those mischief-mongers who ill-treated you are now no more. We want your protection. We shall not let the people rear their heads again."

Nadir interposed, "If that is your motive in making me once more your king, I would beg to be excused. During my travels I have carefully pondered over the condition of the people and I have come to the conclusion that everywhere it

is bad and they deserve pity. In Persia I had no such opportunities. Before, I looked at them through the spectacles of my courtiers. Do not expect that I would let you feather your nests at the expense of my subjects. I am not willing to have the blood of that guilt on my head. I shall evenly weigh the scales of justice. On this condition alone I can go back with you to Persia."

Laila remarked smilingly, "You may condone the people because they bore no ill-will against you. They were out for my blood. How can I forgive them?"

Nadir observed gravely, "Laila, I cannot believe that these words are from your lips."

The representatives thought that it was no use inciting Nadir and Laila any further. They would leave the rest till they had returned to Persia. They will have some such untoward events enacted by a few mischief-mongers in the name of the people that both Laila and Nadir's sympathy and solicitude for the latter would have the bottom taken out of them. One of the nobles, therefore, pleaded passionately, "Your Majesty, do you consider us so foolish as to fear that we shall want you to swerve from the path of justice? Justice is the adornment of your life and its dispensation, our heart's inmost desire, so much so that we wish it to outstrip that of Nausherwan. Our sole intention and effort hereafter will be to see that your subjects do not disrespect you in any way. We shall always be at your service in every emergency."

Then all of a sudden it seemed as if all Nature had become tuneful. The mountains and the trees, the moon and the stars, the wind and the wave started singing in chorus, and in the silence of the breeze and the silvery moonlight there surged up melody after melody. Laila was singing to the accompaniment of her tambourine. It dawned upon one at the time as if rhythm

is at the root of the universe. The goddesses came out and danced on the mountain-tops and the gods responded in a similar manner in the sky. In short, music had created a new world.

Since the day the people had created confusion and chaos outside the palace and insisted on her being banished from the kingdom, Laila's feelings towards them had been somewhat warped. However, from her birth she had learnt to have sympathy for them. Her tender heart would burn with pain whenever she saw any officer of the State inflicting injury or injustice on them, and she would begin to detest money, power and pleasure for the sake of which they had to suffer such hardships. She wished to evoke some such strength in herself which would fill the hearts of the administrators with mercy and those of the people with fearlessness. In her imagination, when a child, she would often see herself seated on a throne and dispensing justice so evenly and adequately as to transform her rule into a record in righteousness. Many a night she dreamt in this way; how often did she imagine herself beside the pillows of those who had been treated unjustly and weeping bitterly for them? But when one day her golden dreams began to be translated into actuality of the opposite kind, she had an agonising experience of her life.

She realized that the people were not so tolerant, humble and helpless as she had thought them to be. They had, on the contrary, more of abjectness, unreason and ungentlemanliness. They did not know how to appreciate good behaviour or to use wisely their newly-acquired power. From that day her heart had turned against the people.

On the day when Nadir and Laila entered again the whole city came to greet them. There was gloom everywhere. From all sides piteous cries were heard. The streets, where the poor

dwelt, were deserted and desolate, while in the quarters of the nobles, wealth wallowed in the mire. At this heart-rending sight Nadir burst forth into tears, whereas a sardonic sort of a smile flitted across Laila's lips.

Nadir was now confronted with complexity. He saw that what he wanted to be done was not done and what he did not want to do was done. The cause of this contrariness was Laila, who interfered with every action of his. She would counter all his measures which aimed at the good and progress of the people, with obstacle after obstacle, so that he could not do anything else except keep quiet. Once he had given up the throne for her sake, when adversity had not as yet tried her. During the period of their fallen fortunes he had seen in her character such charming virtues as had made him happy and mad after her. She was his heaven, to live perpetually in which was his sole supreme desire. For such a Laila, what would he not do? Compared with her, neither the subjects nor sovereignty counted for anything.

Three years rolled by in this way while the condition of the people dwindled day after day.

9

One day Nadir went out a-hunting when, being separated from his companions, he wandered about in the forest till it became dark. He lost even the way to his palace. At last, remembering God, he followed a certain route, hoping that he might come upon some hamlet or village, where he could rest for the night. As he trudged along he saw, in the distance, a village which contained hardly three or four houses. There was, however, a mosque in which a light was flickering, but without any one being there. It was past midnight, so, he thought, it was not proper to trouble any of the inhabitants.

He tied his horse to the trunk of a tree and decided to spend the night in the mosque. A torn mattress lay on the floor. He stretched himself on it. As he was dead tired, he went to sleep immediately. How long he slept he could not recollect, but when he was suddenly awakened by the sound of some one's footsteps, he saw an old man kneeling in prayer. He wondered who could be so absorbed in his supplication at such a late hour, for he did not know that the night had come to a close and it was time to say one's matins. He, therefore, continued to recline on the mattress and watch the worshipper. After the prayer was over, the old man spread out his arms cross-wise on his chest and made a petition to Providence. As he heard it, Nadir's blood curdled up. For, it was a pungent, matter-of-fact and instructive commentary on his rule,—such as he had never heard till then from any one. He had at last an occasion in his life to hear with his own ears his own depreciation. Thus he knew that his rule was far from being an ideal one, but he had no idea that the people found their present condition so insufferable. This was the prayer:—

“O God, Thou art the helper of the helpless. Thou seest the tyranny of our king and yet Thy wrath does not descend on him. The heretic has been so much wrapped up in the love of a beautiful woman that he neither sees with his eyes nor hears with his ears, and, if at all he sees, it is through her eyes or hears it is through her ears. O Lord, this calamity it is now not possible to bear any longer. Either send the king to perdition or take away from the world Thy helpless children. Persia is heartily sick of his oppression and Thou alone canst extricate us out of our calamity.”

10

The old man took up his staff and went away, but as if struck by lightning Nadir lay there well-nigh dead.

For a week Nadir did not go to his court, nor did he allow any of his officers to have access to him. Day after day he cast about in his mind what to do. He would just have something to eat. Again and again Laila would go up to him and, placing his head in her lap or embracing him, ask "Beloved, why do you look so sad and morose?" Seeing her, he would burst into tears, but utter not a single word. Laila or fame, he found it hard to choose between the two. His heart was caught in the grip of these alternatives, and so he was unable to make any decision. He loved popularity, no doubt, but he loved Laila more. He could continue to live, even if disgraced, but to live without her was, he considered, a sheer impossibility. For, Laila permeated his life so completely.

In the end, however, he came to the conclusion, "Laila is mine, I am hers. We are inseparables. We are co-sharers in every activity. Where, then, is the difference of mine and thine? Kingship is transitory, but love is immortal. For eternity we shall be together to enjoy the pleasures of Paradise and our love will shine like stars for ever."

Nadir rose, being self-satisfied in his mind. His face was flushed with victory, from his eyes shone out courage. He was going to drink of the cup of Laila's love, which he had not tasted for full one week. His heart was dancing with the same kind of enthusiasm as he had experienced five years before. Love's flower never fades, nor does Love's stream ever run dry.

But the doors of Laila's apartments were closed and her tambourine, which used to be usually suspended from a nail outside, was not to be seen.

Nadir's heart sank within him. He could understand the cause of the door being closed because she might be in the garden, but how could he explain the absence of her musical in-

strument from its specified spot? May be she had taken it with herself into the garden. But why did he feel as if a cloud of gloom were hanging over him?

With trembling hands he opened the door of her room but she was not there. The bed was there, and unslept in, the taper was burning, the water for the ablutions was kept in a corner. But where was Laila? His feet began to shudder. Did she not sleep overnight? Everything in her apartment was fragrant and full of her memory, but the place was as vacant as the lightless eye.

Nadir's heart was full. He had not the courage to ask anyone about her whereabouts. His mind failed him and, sitting on the floor, he began to weep bitterly. When the flow of his tears stopped a while he smelt Laila's bed in the hope he might be able to inhale the sweet fragrance of her touch, but there was nothing except the fragrance of the rose.

Suddenly he saw a piece of paper projected from below her pillow. Taking courage in both his hands, he looked at it with fear-filled eyes. At a glance he knew the contents. The die had been cast for him. He exclaimed, "O Laila," and then swooned on the floor. This is what Laila had written on that scrap:

"My beloved Nadir, your Laila today parts from you for ever. Do not search for me, for you will not be able to trace me. I was a bonds slave to your love and not ambitious to rule. For a week I have been noticing that your heart has turned away from me. You have neither talked to me nor even looked at me, as if you were sick of me. You can have no idea of the hopes and longings with which I have been to you only to find them doomed to disappointment. I have not done anything to deserve such a severe punishment at your hands. Whatever I did, I did always for your good. I have spent seven days

in weeping for you. It appears as if I have now fallen in your estimation and no longer occupy a place in your heart. The memory of the last five years will always remain fresh and their remembrance would make me ever restless. I came to you with my tambourine and now go away from you with the same tambourine. For full five years I enjoyed the bliss of love, only now to separate from you for life. Laila was a slave to love, and when it fled away, how could Laila remain? Farewell."

❀ THE SHROUD

ONE wintry night, near the door of their hut, before a dim and dying fire an old man and his son sat silently. The young daughter-in-law, Budhia, lay inside convulsed with the pains of child-birth. At intervals she cried out in such a heart-rending manner that their breathing seemed to be suspended. The village was wrapped in darkness and all Nature was still.

Suddenly Gheesu broke the silence, "I do not think," he said, "the poor girl will rally round. But, go in and see how she is."

Madhav answered angrily, "If she must die, then the sooner she dies the better. What is the good of my going in?"

"What a heartless fellow you are!" exclaimed the father, "And such infidelity when you have spent a year in her enjoyable company!"

"But I cannot bear to see her suffering so terribly," rejoined the son.

Gheesu and Madhav belonged to a family of *Chamars*.* They were quite notorious in the village for shirking work. Gheesu would work for one day and then go to sleep for three days; while Madhav would work for half an hour and smoke for one. For this reason, nobody would engage them. As long as there was even a handful of grain in the house they would refuse to exert themselves in the least to earn their liveli-

* One of the backward classes in the village.

hood. Only after they had been forced to fast for four or five days, Gheesu would climb up a tree and fell some wood and Madhav would take it for sale to the market. There was no dearth of work in the village; any hard-working hand could have easily got fifty odd jobs to do. The peasants, however, requisitioned now and again the services of the father and the son, but only when, under pressure of work, they were constrained to do so. If Gheesu and Madhav had been ascetics, they would not have found it difficult to exercise self-control and cultivate self-contentment! Their worldly wealth consisted of a few earthen pots and some ragged clothes. They were free from corroding cares, though they were burdened with debt. They were proof against both insult and injury. They were, however, so gentle-looking that, in spite of their knowing for certain the debt would never be liquidated, the peasants would advance money to them. Gheesu and Madhav would subsist on peas and potatoes, pilfered from the farmers' fields, or suck the juice of a few sugar-canes. The father had gone on in this way for well-nigh sixty years, and the son did not lag behind in following in his footsteps; nay, he had even outshone him in idleness. At the moment they were baking potatoes on the dim fire in front of them. Gheesu had lost his wife long ago; Madhav had married in the preceding year. His wife had introduced order and industry in the house. She would work herself to death and earn the daily feed for both of them. The result was that their idleness increased all the more. In fact they prided themselves on their inactivity and whenever any one asked them to do some work they demanded double the wages. This very woman, who had done so much for them, was dying in labour. And yet, perhaps, they were waiting for her to die so that they might have sound sleep!

Gheesu, who was peeling the potato pulled out from the fire, again asked Madhav to enter the hut and enquire how his wife was feeling. He added that he feared that she had been possessed by some evil spirit and that to exorcise the same, the practitioner of the black art will demand at least a rupee. But Madhav, fearing that if he went in his father would eat up the lion's share of the potatoes, replied that he was afraid to enter.

"Afraid!" observed Gheesu, "afraid of what? I am here if anything goes amiss."

"Then why not go in yourself?" rejoined Madhav. Thereupon Gheesu said, "When your mother lay dying I sat by her bedside for three days at a stretch. But your wife, at whom I have never cast my eyes, would feel rather ill at ease in my presence; particularly, in her present peculiar condition."

"I am a bit worried over what we shall do if a child is born to her. We have not any ginger, molasses or oil in the house," remarked Madhav.

"Everything will be given to us by God," observed Gheesu, "only have faith in Him. Those very persons who are today loath to give us any money, you will see tomorrow, will of their own accord, beg of us to take money from them. Nine children were born in the family, but in the case of every one I have had given to me what I wanted. This time, too, God will pull us through."

It was not at all a strange thing for Gheesu to have such an attitude, for he was, materially, in no way worse than those among whom he lived and laboured. If anything, he was more intelligent than the majority of the peasants in the village. Consequently, he felt more at home in the company of those who haunted the house of the rich. Only he did not follow their ethics and etiquette, nor did he know how to exploit his

association with them, with the result that everyone in the village raised his little finger at him. He had, however, one satisfaction; namely, that even whenever he was down and out, he could afford to be indolent, and that nobody could take advantage of his simple-heartedness and scanty means.

Both Gheesu and Madhav were engaged in eating up with indecent haste, potatoes hot from the fire, each being eager to outstrip the other in consuming as many as possible. They did not mind at all if in doing so their throat and tongue were scorched and their eyes were made wet with tears, for they preferred to have the potatoes within their stomachs to being without them! Gheesu recalled to his mind, and expatiated on, the sumptuous wedding-banquet which was held twenty years before in the house of the generous-hearted lord of the village, how he had partaken of the rich repast to his heart's content, so much so that in the end he had not even the strength and suppleness to rise from his seat and walk back home. The mouth of Madhav, as he listened to Gheesu's narration of the details of the feast, seemed to water, and he exclaimed, "Why does not any one give us such feasts these days?"

"Times have changed", replied Gheesu, "nowadays they talk of effecting economy in expenses on ceremonial occasions. But they do not say anything about reducing the rent of the poor".

"You must have eaten at least twenty fried flour-cakes" asked Madhav.

"No, more than twenty."

"If I had been there, I would have eaten at least fifty."

"I do not recollect exactly but I do not think I consumed less than fifty. You see, in those days I was much stronger than you are today."

The potatoes being finished, they crouched like coiled snakes before the fire and went to sleep, while Budhia's cries still continued to come out intermittently from inside the house.

2

When morning came Madhav entered the house and found his wife lying dead; her limbs cold; her eyes elongated upwards and her body besmirched with dirt. She had given birth to a still-born child. He ran out to Gheesu and afterwards both began to weep bitterly and to beat their chests. Hearing them crying, the neighbours went up to them to console them according to immemorial custom. But soon they turned from crying to the thought of providing fuel and shroud for the funeral. For, their house was as much bereft of money as the nest of a kite is of flesh. Consequently the father and the son repaired to the landlord, who hated both of them, for, in the past, he had often punished them for theft and breach of promise to turn up for work at the appointed hour.

"What is the matter, Gheesu?" he asked as he saw them entering his presence, "Why are you weeping? For days, I have not seen you. Perhaps, you do not wish to live any longer in this village?"

Gheesu, placing his head on the ground and with eyes filled with tears, replied, "A great calamity has befallen us. Madhav's wife passed away overnight. The whole night she was crying piteously with pain. We did all what we could for her, but, alas! in the end she left us. We are ruined, for now we have none to feed us. I am your bondsman. I have come to take refuge in you and to request you to help us in finding the wherewithal for her cremation."

The landlord was a kind-hearted man. But to help Gheesu was like dyeing a black blanket. He felt at first like driving

him away from the door, but presently realized that that was not an occasion for growing angry or overbearing. He, therefore, took out, though unwillingly, two rupees from his purse and flung them in the direction of Gheesu. But he did not cast a gracious glance at him, nor did he offer any consolation to him. On the contrary, he seemed to be glad at having got rid of him.

Exploiting the sympathy and support of the landlord, Gheesu appealed to the villagers for assistance and thus within an hour, he managed to collect about five rupees. Some gave him fuel; others, some grain. And while Gheesu and Madhav went to the market to buy cloth for the shroud, some of the villagers chopped bamboo sticks for the bier. The tender-hearted women-folk saw the dead body and, after paying it the tribute of a tear, went away.

3

When Gheesu met Madhav in the market-place he inquired if the requisite quantity of fuel had been obtained.

"Yes," replied Madhav, "now only the shroud is required."

"Come along, then, let us buy some cheap cloth."

"Yes, yes, cheap cloth will do because I do not think we shall be able to carry the dead body to the crematorium before it is dark and then who is going to see what quality of cloth has been used?"

"What a rotten custom to wrap a dead body in a new cloth," remarked Gheesu, "while the poor girl did not have even a rag given to her all her lifetime."

"Moreover," chimed in Madhav, "the cloth, too, is burnt up in the end."

"Only if we had got these five rupees while she lived," continued Gheesu, "we would have spent the same on the medical treatment."

It seemed both were trying to forestall each other. They went from shop to shop till evening came on and inspected several pieces of cotton and silk, but none of these met with their approval. Then, as if luck would have it, they found themselves in front of a public house, which they entered presently as if according to some pre-meditated plan. For a moment they stood there nonplussed, but soon Gheesu went up to the counter and said to the owner, "A bottle for us, please." And buying a hotch-potch of edibles and some fried fish, they sat down in the portico to drink peacefully. After a few bouts the wine got to their head. Gheesu, once again, repeated that the shroud would be wasted.

Madhav, looking at the sky as if to have the gods witness to his sinlessness, replied, "But such is the way of the world, otherwise people would not give thousands of rupees to the Brahmins, for, no one knows if at all the dead get the same."

"The rich," rejoined Gheesu, "have plenty to waste like that, let them; but we have nothing."

"But how would you silence public criticism when you are asked where the shroud is?"

Gheesu laughed and said, "We shall tell them that the money slipped from the waist-band and in spite of our attempts at finding it, we failed to get it. Of course, they will not trust us and yet a moment afterwards those very persons will give us more money."

Madhav joined in the laughter, feeling glad at the hope of another turn of unexpected good luck. He exclaimed, "She was, indeed, a good woman. She died in harness while serving us."

By this time half the bottle had been consumed. Gheesu ordered two seers more of fried flour-cakes, pickle and cooked vegetables from the shop nearby. In a trice Madhav brought these on two palm-leaves. A rupee and a half was spent over the edibles, leaving with Gheesu only a small balance. And both of them fell upon these as the forest-king falls upon its prey, irrespective of what the people might talk of their heartlessness in the presence of solemn Death, because they had long since scored over such sentiments.

Gheesu observed philosophically, "We are now satisfied, so her soul, too, is bound to be blessed with peace."

Madhav endorsed his statement with his head hung in holy faith. He continued in a prayerful strain, "O Lord, Thou knowest the secret workings of everyone's heart. Be pleased to give her a place in Paradise. Our sincere prayers go forth with her. Never, indeed, have we had such a fine feast."

After a moment a doubt crossed his mind and Madhav asked, "Dad, one day we too shall go there."

Gheesu did not vouchsafe any answer, as he did not desire to mar the pleasure of the present moment by speculating on the doubtful pleasures of post-earthly life.

"While there, if she asks why we did not wrap her body in a shroud, what shall we say?" asked Madhav.

"What could we say?" replied Gheesu.

"But, then, she is certain to ask us that inconvenient question."

"But", Gheesu rejoined, rather in wrath, "may I inquire how you know that she will not have a proper pall? Do you think me to be such a fool? Have I lived my sixty years of precious life in vain? Wait and see, she shall have a suitable shroud."

Madhav diffidently asked, "Who will give it? You have already spent away everything. It is I of whom she will inquire, for it was I who put the red vermilion of marriage at the parting of her hair."

Gheesu repeated, this time more angrily, that she shall get a proper shroud.

"Who will give it?" Madhav inquired again, "Why do you not tell me?"

"These very people who gave us last time; only now they will not place any money in our hands," concluded Gheesu.

As darkness deepened and the stars in the sky began to shine more and more brightly the atmosphere of enjoyment in the public-house also deepened. Some began to sing lustily; others were in a self-praising mood, others exchanged their wine-glasses while some embraced their chums.

The atmosphere was highly charged with excitement. There was intoxication in the very air. More than wine it was the peculiar atmosphere of the public-house which pulled them there. They came there to drown their cares and concerns of life. But soon they were stupefied to such an extent that at times they wondered whether they were living or dead.

The father and the son were, indeed, lucky. They were soon marked by everyone as they sat sipping wine. Between them stood a full bottle, of which they drank with great gusto. When Madhav had had his fill, he gave away the remnants of his leaf-ful of food to a beggar, who stood at the door and who had been looking at them for some time with hungry eyes. For the first time in his life he experienced the joy of giving. Gheesu admonished the beggar to eat to his heart's content and to bless the soul of the real giver, for his blessings were sure to reach her.

Madhav, again, looked at the sky and said, "Father, she will surely go to heaven; nay, be its queen."

Gheesu, swimming as if in the sea of animation, replied, "Yes, son, she shall surely go to heaven, for, while she lived she never harassed any one. Even in her death, we have had one of our life's great desires fulfilled, to wit, this fine food and fill. If she is not admitted into heaven, then, do you think those pot-bellied people who fleece the poor and who, to expiate their sins, go to the Ganges and offer ablutions in the temple will go there?"

But this mood of joyous faith and hope gave way to one of depression and sorrow.

Madhav said, "But, father, she suffered all along in her life. Ah! how she suffered, specially, at the time of her death!" and he burst forth into tears.

Gheesu consoled him and advised him to rejoice, instead, that she had luckily been released so soon from the web of the world's woe.

Both of them suddenly started singing lustily. "O world-siren, world-siren, why dost thou wink at us?"

Then under the influence of liquor they danced, they got up again, gesticulated and eventually dropped down on the road.

♣ THE CHESS-PLAYERS

IT was the time of Wajid Ali Shah. Lucknow was plunged in pleasures. The young and the old, the poor and the rich—all were pleasure-bent. To kill time, some held dancing parties, others smoked or sipped opium with great gusto in company. Apathy was writ large across every aspect of life: administration, art, literature, industry and social conduct. The state officials were cradled in the lap of luxury; the poets sang of the pangs of love; and the craftsmen were engaged in manufacturing fineries, perfumes and paints. In short, every one of them was wrapped up in voluptuousness, unmindful of the world, its ways and its work. Quail-fights and partridge-fights were wagered upon. There was among the people a passion for the chess-board and the playing-card. From the prince down to the poorest person, every one was caught up in the whirlpool, so much so that when the beggars got as alms any money to buy some bread with, they spent the same on opium. Games like chess are a whetstone for the intellect of the players, who gradually cultivate the habit of tackling knotty problems. Arguments for and against are advanced clearly and cogently. (The world is not without such persons even today.)

Therefore, no thinking person could ever grudge Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali if they spent a major portion of their time on sharpening their intellects by playing chess. They both had some patrimony and so had no worry about eking out an existence. To relieve the tedium of time, which hung heavily on their hands, they would pre-occupy themselves with playing chess. Every morning, after breakfast, the chess-

board would be set and the operations start. So absorbed would they become in the game that soon they grew oblivious of the passing hour. Morning would wear on to noon, and noon to evening. From the inner apartments would come repeatedly the message that dinner was ready, and every time the messenger was told to go back and lay out the cloth and cover, till at last the cook, his patience strained to breaking-point, would bring the food into the very room where the two friends sat playing. And they would carry on eating and playing simultaneously. In Mirza Sajjad Ali's house there was no elderly person; so the game of chess was played in the drawing-room. But this did not mean that the other members of his family approved of his conduct. Not only they, but even the servants of the house and the neighbours looked upon chess-playing as ominous, as the cause of the ruin of a family's fortune. It was a game which brought about drift and downfall in the life of those who succumbed to it. It was a disease, said they. The Begum (the wife of the Mirza) hated it to such an extent that on every available occasion she took him to task for being so fond of the game. But she had seldom such occasions. She would be still sleeping in the morning when the chess-board was set; and at night, too, the Mirza would enter the inner apartments after she had gone to bed. She, however, wreaked her anger on the poor servants. "Does the Mirza want betel-nuts? Tell him to come himself and take them. Has he no time for taking his food? Then take it and fling it at his head. It matters not whether he eats it or throws it to a dog." But she could not say anything to him face to face. She was not so indifferent to, or angry with, her husband as she was with his friend, the Mir. She had nicknamed the latter "Mir-Begaru" (i.e., Mir, the spoiler). Presumably the Mirza, in his own self-defence, used to father the whole blame on the Mir.

One day the Begum had a headache. She asked Hirya, the

maid-servant, to run up to her master and to ask him to send for some medicine from the family physician. The maid-servant did her bidding. The Mirza said to her, "Go in, I am just coming." The Begum was all wrath. While she had a headache she could not bear that her husband should be busy playing chess. She grew red in the face. She ordered the servant to ask the Mirza to come there quickly, else she would have to go to the doctor by herself. The Mirza was playing at the time an intriguing game. He was on the point of inflicting in a few moves a crushing defeat on the Mir. He flared up: "Is she dying? Can't she wait a while?"

Mir: "You had better go in, Mirza. Women are very touchy in such matters."

Mirza: "Why? Because you are about to lose the game?"

Mir: "Do not be so cocksure, sir; I have hit upon a move, which will paralyse all your plans. I repeat, you would do well to attend to the Begum, for why should you unnecessarily hurt her feelings?"

Mirza: "I will not move till I have defeated you."

Mir: "I will not play. I say again, go in."

Mirza: "I shall have to go to the doctor, don't you see? Her complaint about a headache is a mere pretext on her part to harass me."

Mir: "Whatever be the fact, you have to humour her."

Mirza: "Very well, but before I go, let me, make one more move."

Mir: "Certainly not. Until you have attended to the Begum, I will not touch the pieces on the chess-board."

The Mirza was, consequently, constrained to go in. When he entered the inner apartments, he found the Begum's face framed in a frown. She ranted forth, "You are so mad after

that ominous chess of yours that you do not care even if one is dying. The world would not be a loser if men like you were not there."

Mirza: "That friend of mine, the Mir, would not let me come. It is with great difficulty that I have succeeded in coming away."

Begum: "He is himself a drone; so, perhaps, he considers others also drones. Has he no children? Or has he done away with them?"

Mirza: "Whenever he comes he sits away glued to his seat; so I have perforce to play chess with him."

Begum: "Why do you not drive him away from the door?"

Mirza: "He is of an equal status with me; nay, an inch or two taller in social stature and older in years, too. Therefore, one has to respect him."

Begum: "Well, if you do not, then I will turn him out. Let him get angry. He cannot do us any harm, for we are in no way dependent upon him. Hirya, go and bring the chess-board from the drawing-room, telling the Mir that, as the Mirza will not play, he had better go home."

Mirza: "No, no, do not be so hard on him. Do you wish to see me disgraced? Hirya, stop, do not go."

Begum: "Why don't you let her go? Swear that you will not stop her. If you do, then I will go myself."

Saying this, the angry Begum moved towards the drawing-room. The Mirza's countenance changed colour. He began to implore her. "By Hussain, by God, do not go." But she did not heed him. She went up to the door of the drawing-room, but then suddenly felt as if she had been fettered, and so could not muster courage to go into the presence of a stranger. She, however, peeped in. As luck would have it, the drawing room

was empty. During the absence of the Mirza the Mir had changed the positions of one or two pieces on the chess-board, and, to gloss over this foul game as well as to appear innocent, he was pacing outside. The Begum went in and turned the chess-board topsy-turvy. Then she threw away some of the pieces below the board, others outside, and bolted the room from within. The Mir, being near the door, saw the pieces being flung outside and also heard the jingling of the bangles. And when the door was closed, he at once concluded that the Begum was in a temper. So, softly, he slipped away home.

Mirza: "You have wrought havoc today."

Begum: "If the Mir comes again this side, I shall have him turned out. If you had loved your God as much as you love him and your chess, you would have become a saint by now. You play at chess the whole day, while I have to attend all the time to the kitchen and your creature comforts. Will you now go to the doctor, or are you still incorrigible?"

The Mirza walked out of his house, but instead of going to the doctor's he went to the house of the Mir and told him all that had taken place. The Mir explained at the end of the Mirza's tale: "When I saw those pieces being flung out of the drawing-room, I immediately knew what was up. So I straight-away took to my heels. She seems to be very angry. You have spoiled her by placing her on a pedestal. She should have no concern with what you do outside the inner apartments. She ought merely to keep house for you, and not put her nose in any other affair."

Mirza: "Leave alone all that kind of talk. But tell me, where will be our *rendezvous* hereafter?"

Mir: "Do not worry. My whole house is at your disposal. Come on. We can start a game this very moment there."

Mirza: "But how shall I appease the anger of the Begum? When I played at chess at home, she made it so hot for me. When I play there, she will, I am afraid, flay me alive."

Mir: "Let the dogs bark. She will be once again her normal self within four or five days. But, you must do one thing from today: You should be rather stiff and stern with her and you ought also to stand on your dignity."

2

For some inscrutable reason the Begum of the Mir liked her husband to keep away from the house as much as possible. Therefore, she never really objected to his passion for playing chess. On the contrary, whenever he delayed in his playing she would particularly remind him. This led the husband to conclude that the wife was, on the whole, a very well-behaved and wise woman. But now when she saw that the carpet and the chess-board were spread out in the drawing-room every day from early morning and that the Mir stuck to them, she began to feel very miserable. For, now her liberty of movement was clipped. She would always yearn for an opportunity to stand in the door of the house and watch the world's passing-show.

The servants, too, whispered to one another how angry they were over the new order of things. Formerly, they used to spend their time in slothful ease, not caring at all about the incomings and outgoings in the house. But now they had to be at the beck and call of their master, who would one time order for betel-leaves, and, at another, for sweets. So they would often complain to their mistress: "The master's passion for chess has taken life out of us. We have to go on his errands so frequently that our feet have got blisters. From morning to evening, he is at it all the time. One could understand if he played it for an hour or two by way of diversion. However,

we are your servants and we shall carry out every order of yours. But one thing we must say, that the game of chess brings on ill-luck. No chess-player has ever prospered. Some calamity or other befalls him. Streetful after streetful of players has been blotted out of existence. Nowadays every one in the locality is talking about the matter. We have eaten your salt, and we feel deeply grieved, indeed, whenever any one talks evil against our master. But we are helpless." Thereupon the Begum would chime in: "I myself do not like the game. But I, too, am helpless as he does not listen to any one."

There were in the neighbourhood a few persons who belonged to the older generation. They began to entertain all sorts of imaginary fears about the future of the chess-players. They would say, "No good can now ever happen to the people. When our leading men have come to such a sorry pass, then God help the country. The present rule will perish as a consequence of the prominent persons' passion for chess-playing. The signs are ominous."

There was confusion in the country. In broad daylight the people were robbed. None attended to their complaints. The wealth of the villages was being attracted to the cities, and spent over prostitutes and professional actors and on several other forms of pleasure. The debt to the East India Company was daily mounting higher and higher. The blanket was becoming wetter and heavier. On account of inefficient administration the collection of annual rent had fallen in arrears. The Resident had over and again warned the King. But all was in vain, for the people were steeped in the pleasures of the senses.

For months the Mir and the Mirza went on playing chess in the former's drawing-room. They would plan new conquests of each other's kings and castles. Sometimes, however, in the course of their play, they would quarrel and indulge in abuse,

but soon they would make up. Sometimes the play would be stopped abruptly and both would go back home. The nightly sleep, however, would smooth over their differences, for, in the morning, both would be present again in the drawing-room.

One day the two friends were floundering through the intricacies of the game when a military officer on horseback arrived outside and began to inquire about the exact location of the Mirza's house. The Mir was out of his wits. "What a bolt from the blue!" said he, "Why this summons from His Majesty? I am in for some trouble." So he closed the doors and asked one of the servants to tell the messenger that he was not at home.

Messenger: "If your master is not at home, then where is he?"

Servant: "I do not know. But what is your mission?"

Messenger: "Who are you to whom I should reveal that? The King has summoned your master. Perhaps, a few recruits for the army are required. Your master is an estate-holder, and he has received it from the King. He must be ready, therefore, for service in the wars. He will then know, to his cost, what it is to be an estate-holder!"

Servant: "Very well, your message will be delivered to my master."

Messenger: "That is not sufficient. I shall come again to-morrow, for I have orders to conduct him into the presence of His Majesty."

The messenger went away. The Mir began to shake with fear. He turned to the Mirza, "What next?"

Mirza: "An ordeal, indeed! I am afraid lest I, too, might be called."

Mir: "The cursed fellow said he would come again to-morrow."

Mirza: "If we are sent to the battlefield, we shall die before our time."

Mir: "There is only one way of escape; namely, not to be at home from tomorrow. Hereafter we shall make the wilderness on the bank of the Gomti our *rendezvous*. I am sure no one could track us down there. And so the messenger would necessarily have to go back."

Mirza: "By God! you have hit upon the right ruse, for there is no other way of escape."

Outside, the Begum was saying to the messenger, "You threatened him all right." He replied, "I can make such sim-
pletons dance on my finger-tips. All their courage and intelligence have been sapped away in playing chess. Now, you will see that he dare not stay at home!"

3

From the next day the *Mirza* and the *Mir* began to set out before daybreak from their homes, bound for the bank of the Gomti. They would carry with them a small carpet and a box full of betel-leaves, and make for an old, deserted and dilapidated mosque, built by Nawab Asaf-ud-dowlah. On the way they would buy some tobacco and *chilam* (the top of the hubble-bubble) and bits of charcoal. On arrival at their destination, they would spread the carpet, feed the hubble-bubble and begin their game of chess. And before long they would be so absorbed in it that they were lost to the world. During the play no words except 'checked', 'conquered', would escape their lips. In their concentration they outstripped even the ascetics. At noon, when they felt hungry, they would go to a baker near by, finish their meal in haste, draw a few hurried puffs at the hubble-bubble and resume the game. Sometimes they even forgot to take food!

The political condition of the country was growing from bad to worse. The Company's forces were advancing towards Lucknow. The whole city was in a panic. The inhabitants rushed to the villages. But the two chess-players were absolutely unconcerned. They would return home through the by-lanes, lest any one in the King's service might detect them and conscript them. They were waiting to come into possession of their estates, which yielded an annual income of several thousands, as freeholds.

One day they were playing at chess in the ruins of the mosque. The Mirza was being defeated at every move by the Mir. Just then, in the distance, a regiment of the Company's English soldiers was seen coming. It was proceeding to Lucknow to assert its authority over the city and the kingdom.

The Mir exclaimed, "The English army is advancing towards the city. God help us!"

Mirza: "Let it come, but you had better first save your position."

Mir: "Come, let us have a look at the soldiers. We can watch them from this hidden vantage-ground."

Mirza: "You could do all that afterwards. Be quick, else you will lose another move."

Mir: "They appear to be about five thousand strong. They have a frightening look. They have also an artillery."

Mirza: "I am too experienced a player to be trapped by you like that!"

Mir: "You are a strange man, indeed. The city is in the grip of a great calamity, while you are pre-occupied with your play. Have you any idea that if a siege is laid to the city, you and I shall not be able to return home?"

Mirza: "We shall think of that when the time to go home comes. Look to your game; otherwise one more move on my part and you will be defeated."

The army marched past them. It was 10 a.m. They set the chess-board again for a fresh game.

Mir: "What about our food to-day? Aren't you feeling hungry?"

Mirza: "No, not at all. But I wonder what is happening in the city at this hour."

Mir: "Nothing whatsoever. The people must have finished their meals and enjoying their usual mid-day rest. And the Nawab, too, will be in his pleasure-house."

This time they went on playing till 3 p.m. The *Mirza's* game was weak. Just when the gong was sounding the hour of four, the sound of the footsteps of the English soldiers, on their return march, was heard. Nawab Wajid Ali had been made prisoner and the English were taking him to an unknown destination. There had been neither confusion nor carnage in the city. Not a single drop of blood was spilled. Never in history had an independent kingdom been conquered so swiftly and without a blow struck in defence. It was, on the contrary, cowardice at which even the most cowardly would weep. The Nawab of Oudh had been captured while the people of Lucknow were plunged in pleasure! This was, indeed, the limit of political degradation.

The *Mirza* said, "The tyrants have taken away the Nawab, as a prisoner."

Mir: "Here is my next move."

Mirza: "Pray, wait a while. I cannot put my heart into the game at the moment. The poor Nawab must be shedding tears of blood."

Mir: "That is but natural, for where will he have his round of pleasures under the changed conditions? Here, then, is my next move."

Mirza: "No one's days are uniformly alike. What a dreadful sight!"

Mir: "That is true. But now you are in a tight corner. My next move will kill you. It will be impossible for you to escape."

Mirza: "By God! you are a heartless fellow. Even such a catastrophe does not move you. Ah! poor Wajid Ali Shah."

Mir: "You had better first save your own chess-king, then there will be time enough for you to lament for the King of Oudh. One more move and you will be dead."

The English army and the Nawab passed out of sight. No sooner were they gone than the chess-board was spread out again, because for a chess-player the blow of defeat is unbearable.

Mir: "Come, let us pray for the peace and welfare of the Nawab."

But the loyalty of the Mirza had been drowned in his defeat. He was impatient to take his revenge.

4

It was evening. The bats in the ruined mosque began to cry. The swallows clung to their nests. But the Mirza and the Mir were still playing at chess with as much zeal as if they were two warriors thirsting for each other's blood. The Mirza had lost three games in succession. It was now his fourth game, the prospects of which, too, were far from rosy. Again and again, he played a cautious game as he was keen on winning, but some faulty move on his part would always mar his

chances of success. With every defeat his desire to avenge himself became more intense. On the other hand, the Mir was singing lustily and snapping his fingers in token of joy at his victory, as if he had come into possession of some hidden treasure. This incensed the Mirza all the more, but to cover up his sorrow at his repeated defeats he pretended to approve of his associate's behaviour. But as his game became weaker, he grew more nervous. The result was that he began to lose his temper at every trifle. "Sir," he said angrily to the Mir, "Do not be changing your plans and positions so frequently. Be a little more steady in your game. Why have you kept your hand firmly on that piece? Let it go. You should not even touch any of the pieces before you have first decided in your mind what your next move is going to be. Your movement is very slow; in half an hour you make only one move. If hereafter you take more than five minutes to make any move, you will be penalized. Again, you have changed your move? Keep the piece back in its previous position." The Mir's anger was roused as he feared a defeat. "When did I make a move at all?"

Mirza: "You have had your move. Keep back the piece there."

Mir: "Why? I never let it go!"

Mirza: "If you do not let the piece go till Doomsday, shall we stop the play for your sake? When you see you are about to be defeated, you try all these tricks."

Mir: "It is you who make a row. Victory or defeat is a matter of luck. None can win through strategem or quarrelling."

Mirza: "Well, you are defeated in the game."

Mir: "Why?"

Mirza: "Otherwise return that piece to its original position."

Mir: "No, I will not."

Mirza: "You must."

The dispute began to deepen. Both of them remained entrenched in their respective positions. They indulged in irrelevancies. The *Mirza* roared, "Your forefathers never played chess. How could you, then, ever know the laws of the game? They were grass-cutters. What do you, therefore, know of chess-playing! Nobility or culture is a different matter altogether. None can become cultured overnight, simply by getting an estate."

Mir: "It is your forefathers who must have been grass-cutters. For, in our family, chess has been played for generations."

Mirza: "You have spent your whole life in serving as a cook of Ghazi-ud-din Haidar. Today you style yourself a *rais* (a noble). True gentility is not so easily acquired."

Mir: "Why do you stain the memory of your ancestors? They were cooks, not mine, for we have been always the companions of the King at table."

Mirza: "Don't tell lies! you braggart!"

Mir: "Behave yourself, otherwise you will come to harm. I cannot stand such insults from anyone. I shall pluck out the eyes of the person who insults me. Will you have it out then?"

Mirza: "Do you want me to prove my mettle? Come out, then, and let us have a duel."

Mir: "Well, I am not going to be daunted like that."

They forthwith unsheathed their swords. In those days the nobles went about with swords in their waist-bands. Both

were, no doubt, pleasure-loving, but not cowards. They had no loyalty left for their King, it is true, but each of them possessed courage. Their swords gleamed in the sun and the sound of their clash began to be heard. Before long they were both mortally wounded and lay dead on the ground. They, who did not shed a tear for their King, now gave away their lives in defending their ministers on the chess-board!

Darkness was creeping on. The chess-board was set. The two kings of the chess-board sat, as it were, weeping at the fate of the two warriors. Silence reigned everywhere. The broken arches, the dilapidated walls and the dust-soiled minarets of the mosque looked at the corpses and nodded!

AFTER leaving the Government Orphanage I enlisted in the army. I was strong and stalwart. My hands and feet were not only longer than those of the ordinary people, but they were also more muscular. I was exactly six feet nine inches in height. In my regiment I was known to every one as a giant. From the very beginning of my career as a soldier good fortune began to smile on me. I did several such meritorious deeds which brought me increasing security and salary. Major Sardar Himmat Singh was very kind to me because I had once saved his life. Besides, I do not know why, whenever I saw him, feelings of deep devotion for him surged up in my heart. I considered him worthy of reverence in every respect, and his treatment of me, too, was both amiable and affectionate.

I have no recollection of my parents, nor do I know their present whereabouts. But sometime, when I ponder over this point, some dim scenes pass before my mind's eye; high mountains and in their midst the house of a family and peeping out of it the face of a woman, perhaps, of my mother. No doubt I was brought up amidst the hills. To the east of Peshawar, at a distance of eighty miles, there is a village called Kulaha, which has a Government Orphanage. It is there that I spent my early life and the air and water of the Himalayas co-operated in giving me my present physique. I am as big and backward as the Afridis, the Gilzais and the Mahsudis and other tribes of the Frontier, with this difference only that now I am a little more civilized than they are. I know how to read and

write as well as to talk somewhat intelligently. I am also acquainted with social etiquette. But in my physical form I am on all fours with the man of the Frontier.

At times I am seized with wanderlust and wish to roam about in the mountains, but this desire of mine has always been suppressed by considerations of earning a livelihood. In that barren country food is very scarce, and the people there often, for the sake of a single slice of bread, kill a person and in order to get a piece of cloth, rip open a corpse, just as to possess a rifle they attack the Government forces. Moreover, every one of the tribesmen knew me and was thirsting for my blood. If perchance they were to come upon me they would at once blot me out of all existence. For, Heaven knows, how many Afridis and Ghilzais I had despatched to their deaths, and arrested and sent to prison and how many villages I had reduced to ashes. So I was also always very vigilant and as far as possible I never stayed for more than one week in one place.

2

One day, at about 2 p.m. I was going in the direction of Major Himmat Singh's house. For some days we had been in a holiday mood because, having only lately burnt down a number of villages belonging to the tribes, we feared no attack from the latter in the immediate future. We used to spend our time, therefore, in conversation and convivial company. As that day time seemed to hang rather heavily on my hands, I rose to go to the Major's quarters. But, unfortunately, there was a mishap on the way. One old Afridi who, however, had still sufficient strength to wring an Indian youth's neck, was engaged in a duel with a young soldier. Before my very eyes he took out a sharp dagger from his waist-belt and thrust it through the latter's chest. He did all this to possess the rifle, which was on the person of the young soldier. In a trice he

was done to death. The old man then ran away with the rifle. I at once gave him chase, but he sped on so swiftly that within the twinkling of an eye he was out of sight. I, however, pursued him till, when the Frontier was reached, there was a distance of about twenty feet between us. He turned round and when he saw that I was following him, he immediately took an aim with his rifle at me. But I lay myself down on the ground and the bullet struck, instead, the stone in front of me. He thought that I had been killed, so slowly with cautious steps he advanced towards me. I suspended my breathing for a moment, and when he came near me I sprang upon him like a lion and, catching him by the neck, threw him on the ground. I, then, drew my dagger through him. His drama of life had ended. In the meantime, a few of my fellow-soldiers also arrived on the scene. Everyone began to praise me for my heroism. I was not as yet quite myself but soon I regained my normal consciousness. I do not know why the sight of the dead old Afridi made me so sad. I had before that killed so many of his brothers, but never had I felt so grieved. I squatted on the ground and began looking intently at the old man. Thinking that I had been wounded, my fellow-soldiers asked me a number of questions. But I got up slowly and started silently towards the city, while they dragged the dead body behind me. The citizens burst into a paean of praise for what I had done. But without opening my lips I entered the house of Sardar Himmat Singh.

At that time he was in his private apartment and writing something. Seeing me, he asked if I had killed the Afridi. As I seated myself I answered, "Yes, but I do not know, Major, what has come over me. It appears I have become somewhat chicken-hearted."

The Sardar was rather surprised and so exclaimed, "Asad Khan and cowardice cannot go together. It is impossible."

I rose from my seat and said, "I feel ill at ease inside. Let us go out into the verandah, if you do not mind."

He came up to me and, affectionately stroking me on my back, observed, "There is nothing to worry about. You are only tired and out of breath. Come along, however, and let us sit outside. The evening breeze will soon refresh you."

Both of us, then, went into the verandah and sat on chairs. The corpse lay in the square and a crowd had gathered round it. When the people saw me sitting in the verandah they pointed me out to one another. Thereupon the Sardar remarked, "Asad Khan, look, how high have you risen in their esteem. Your heroism is the talk of the town, and yet, you say, you are a coward!"

I smiled and replied, "Ever since I killed the old fellow my heart has been crying fie upon me."

The Sardar laughed and said, "Because you have killed someone who was weaker than yourself."

"Perhaps" I answered, consoling myself.

Just then an Afridi woman softly came up and stood in front of the house. No sooner did the Sardar see her than his face blanched with fear. Presently, however, he turned his frightened eyes at me. I, too, looked at him in wonder. She had a brawny body and was dressed in Khaki pyajamas and blue shirt. Her head, like that of the Baluchi women, was tied. She was jasmine-white in complexion. She was in the prime of her life. But at that time there was such terror in her eyes that any one would have been filled with fear. When she turned these in my direction and stared hard at me I, too, felt afraid of her. She then looked at the Sardar and spat on the ground. Once again she cast a glance at me and went away.

The Sardar became himself as soon as she departed and I also had a load off my head. I asked him, "Do you know her?"

He heaved a deep sigh and said, "Yes, very well, indeed. There was a time when she loved me deeply and, in fact, once saved my life at the cost of her own. But now she hates me. It is she who murdered my wife. Whenever I see her all my senses leave me and the dreadful scene comes up before my mind's eye."

I inquired in a voice, tremulous with fear, "But she looked at me, too, with such frightening eyes that my hair stood on end."

Shaking his head, he answered seriously, "Asad Khan, from now onward you should be on your guard. Perhaps, she is a relation of the old Afridi. It might be that he was her father or brother. She is a terror. Her looking at you in that awesome manner had a meaning."

My nerves were on edge, so I changed the course of our conversation. "Why do you not hand her over to the police? They will surely hang her."

He replied, "Asad Khan, once she saved my life and may be even now she loves me. Thereby hangs a tale. One day I shall tell you the whole story."

This filled me with curiosity to know more; so I entreated him to relate his past then and there. At first he tried to evade, but on my pressing him, he eventually agreed. "Asad Khan", said he, "I look upon you as my own brother, consequently, I shall not keep back anything from you."

He continued, "Five years ago I was not as old as I look now. I am about forty years of age. Not a single hair of my head was then grey, and in physical prowess I was a match for two young fellows. I have come to grips with the Germans and killed many of them. After the Great War I was appointed

Major of the Indian troops on the Frontier. When I came here first I had to contend with a number of difficulties, but I made light of them and gradually overcame them all. I learnt Pushtu and several other languages, so much so that I could speak them fluently and idiomatically. Then forming a few patrols, I explored the interior of the country. While engaged in this reconnaissance I had many a hair-breadth escape. At last, I was able to have an easy time as well as comfort. In those days I performed actions which brought me an honourable mention from the Government. Once I rescued single-handed the wife of Colonel Hamilton. I have also saved the lives of several Indian men and women. Three years after my arrival, there took place the incident which I am going to relate to you.

One night I was resting in my camp. The war with the Afridis was on. Dead tired as they were at the end of the day's fighting the soldiers were all asleep. There was no stir anywhere. In a short time I, too, went to bed. When I awoke I found an Afridi, who was twice my age, sitting on my chest and on the point of piercing his dagger through it. I was completely under his control and there was no way of escape. But I behaved with great courage and calmness and said to him in Pushtu, 'Do not kill me. I am an officer in the Indian army. Take me with you as a hostage and the Government will pay you money to get me released.'

As God would have it, my advice did not fall flat on him. Binding me hand and foot with a rope, which he took off his waist, he carried me on his shoulders, as if I were an inanimate load, out of the camp. Outside the man-slaughter had not ceased. He uttered a strange cry and ran away towards a forest with a light foot, as he did not seem to feel at all the burden on his back. Behind him were seen coming a few of his fellow-tribesmen with their booty.

Early in the morning we reached a tank, which was surrounded on all sides by high mountains. Its water was crystal clear and here and there, there were some wild plants. We halted by the side of the tank. The old man, who was in fact the leader of the tribe, threw me down on the stones, with the result that my back was so severely injured that I feared that a bone had, perhaps, been broken. But by the grace of God this did not turn out to be so. The tribal leader then asked, 'What ransom will you get us?'

Suppressing my pain I replied, 'Five hundred rupees.'

He made a wry face and rejoined, 'If we get even a pie less than two thousand rupees your life will be in danger.'

I said rather thoughtfully, "The Government does not pay such a big amount for a native."

He then took out his dagger and angrily exclaimed, "Why did you then tell me that the Government will give me a handsome ransom? Have it then."

Saying this he rushed towards me.

I was out of my wits and said, 'Very well, I shall get you two thousand rupees.'

He stopped short and burst forth into a loud laugh. The echoes of his uproars and laughter shook the very hills. I thought to myself, 'He is a terrible man.'

The other tribesmen then placed the things they had plundered before their leader. Amongst these, there were several rifles, cartridges, loaves and clothes. I was also searched. They found on my body a six-chambered revolver. Seeing this, the leader jumped with joy and began to turn the revolver round and round. He divided the spoils equally amongst his men, but he kept the revolver for himself as a special prize.

After a brief rest we resumed our journey. My feet were unfettered and I was asked to walk along with the party. My eyes were bandaged so that I might not see the road. My hands, however, were still bound with a rope, one end of which was in the hands of an Afridi.

We walked on and on and my feet were sore tired, but, as yet the destination was not reached. The summer sun was shining relentlessly. My throat was parched with thirst and my feet were scorched, but they marched on unmindful of the heat. They talked to one another but I could not understand anything of their conversation, though now and again I could make out the meaning of some stray words. They were jubilant over their triumph. One of the Afridis began singing a song, which was indeed, very good."

Asad Khan asked, "What was that song?"

Major Himmatsingh replied, "The purport of the song was this: One young Afridi is going away from home. The wife inquires where he is bound. He replies that he is going to bring bread and clothes for her. What about the children? What will he bring for them? further asks the wife. He answers, 'I shall bring rifles for them so that when they grow up they, too, may fight and bring bread and clothes for their lady-loves.' The wife then says, 'But tell me when will you come?' He rejoins, 'Only after I have won some trophy, otherwise I shall die while fighting.' 'You are a brave man', concludes the wife, 'You are sure to succeed.'

I was held spell-bound by the song. No sooner was it over than we also stopped. The bandage on my eyes was removed. I saw a vast plain in front of me, around it were their cave dwellings.

Again my person was searched. I was stripped up to the waist. There was a huge slab of stone near by. They removed

it to one side. Then I was taken towards it. I trembled with fear, for it meant being entombed alive. I looked with piteous eyes at the tribal leader and said, "The Government will give you the money. Pray do not kill me."

He laughed, "No one is going to kill you. You will be only shut up in this house. When the money is received you will be released."

His words filled me with hope for life. Placing my pocket book and pencil before me he said, "Write out the letter for the money. If a pie less than two thousand rupees is received, you will be killed."

I wrote a letter to the Commissioner and handed it over to him. Then they lowered me into the dungeon and removed the rope."

3

Sardar Himmatsingh heaved a deep sigh and resumed his story, "Asad Khan, when I was being taken to that dark dungeon I was shaking with fear. Instead of darkness there was visible, at the bottom, a dim light. The cave, from inside, was neither very big nor very small. The floor was rough and it appeared as if the cave had been formed by the constant flow of water there. It was enclosed with thick stone walls on all sides in which were, at places, some holes to let in air and light. When my feet touched the bottom I began to revolve in my mind the sorry situation in which I found myself. I was in great distress. But it was destined that I should suffer in that way.

Evening came on. No one had made any inquiries about me. I was mad with hunger, and again and again I cursed God and myself alternately, for when man is helpless, he curses God.

At last some one threw four big loaves through one of the holes. As a dog falls upon a crumb I moved towards those loaves

and, holding them up, looked in the direction of the hole. But no one threw in anything more. Then I began eating the loaves. A little while afterwards an iron cup, full of water, was placed near the hole. Thanking God for this mercy I quaffed off the water. When I was refreshed I said, 'I want a little more of water.'

Thereupon the echo of a dreadful laughter from the other side of the wall was heard, and some one said with a chuckle, 'You will have water again only tomorrow. Return the cup, otherwise tomorrow you will not have any water at all.'

I was helpless and so I placed back the cup.

Several days passed in this way. Every morning and evening I was supplied with four loaves and a cupful of water. Gradually I got inured to that sort of insipid life. Loneliness did not pall on me as before. To relieve the tedium of the hour I would sing now and again, some time in my own mother-tongue and some time in Pushtu. This would cheer me up as well as console me.

One night I was singing a Pushtu song in which Majnun says to the scorching whirlwinds, 'What is that passion of yours which consumes to ashes the whole caravans? Why does not a similar passion burn me up? Is it because I have another kind of fire within me? Look, when Laila comes here in search of me, cover me up with sand lest her heart might break like brittle glass.'

I stopped singing, when some one said from the other side of the hole, 'Prisoner, sing that song again.'

I was startled. I was partly glad and partly surprised. I asked, 'Who are you?'

'I am Turaya, the daughter of the tribal leader,' came back the answer.

'Do you like that song?' I further inquired.

Turaya replied, 'Yes, prisoner, I wish to hear the song over again'.

I sang the song joyfully. When it was concluded, Turaya observed, "Sing that song daily and I shall send you every day some more loaves and water."

She went away. Thereafter every night I sang that song and Turaya would come up near the wall and listen to it.

Thus I hit upon something to divert my mind.

About a month passed in this way. As days passed I was becoming more and more anxious, for as yet no remittance was received for my release. Then exactly on the expiry of the month the tribal chief came up to me and said. 'Prisoner, if by tomorrow no money is received I shall kill you. For, I cannot go on feeding you indefinitely.'

I feared that the die was cast. That day I did not eat or drink anything. In the evening as usual some loaves were thrown through the hole, but I had no inclination to eat them.

At the usual time Turaya came and said, 'Prisoner, sing the song.'

I remained silent because I was feeling out of sorts that day.

Turaya asked, 'Prisoner, have you gone to bed?'

I replied mournfully, 'No, what is the use of sleeping to-day? Tomorrow I shall sleep a sleep which knows no waking.'

Turaya queried, 'Will not the Government send the money?'

I replied, 'It will remit no doubt, but tomorrow, says the leader, I am going to be killed. Of what avail shall the money be to me, then, if it is received after my death?'

Turaya replied reassuringly, 'I shall see to it that you are not put to death to-morrow. So go on with the song.'

I began to sing. While departing, she asked me if I preferred to stay in a cage.

I gleefully answered, "Yes, indeed. For at any rate I shall be out of this hell."

Turaya said, 'Tomorrow I shall tell my father about it.'

Next day I was taken out of that dark dungeon. Both my feet were placed in two thick beams which were then fixed into the cave with wooden nails.

The leader of the tribe came up to me and said, 'Prisoner, a fortnight's further extension is granted to you, if before its expiry, however, the money is not received your head will be chopped off. Write another letter today to your family. If I do not get the money before the Id festival, I shall make mince meat of you.'

Accordingly, I wrote another letter and gave it to him.

After he went away Turaya came there. She is the same young woman who was here a little while ago. It is she who was the daughter of the tribal leader and used to hear my song. And it was because of her recommendation that my life was saved eventually.

Turaya looked at me with intent eyes and so did I. She asked, 'Prisoner, whom have you at home'?

I replied in a voice vibrant with fear, 'Two little children and none else'. I said that because I had heard that the Afridis love children very deeply.

Turaya asked, 'They have no mother?'

I answered only to provoke her pity, 'No, their mother is dead. They are alone, and I do not know if they are alive or dead now, because they have none else besides me to look after them'.

As I spoke these words, my eyes were wet with tears. Turaya's too, were bedimmed; but controlling her emotions she said, 'The children are alone? There is none else to take care of them? They must, then, be crying all the time!'

I replied, well pleased in my own mind, 'Yes, they must be crying bitterly, indeed, and who knows by now they might be dead also.' Turaya, interposing, said, 'No, they are not dead. But, tell me where do you stay? I shall go and find out how they are'. I told her the whereabouts of my house. She observed, 'I have been that side several times while making purchases from the market. Next time when I go there I shall bring you some news about your children.'

My doubting heart inquired, 'When will you next go a-marketing?' She wistfully answered, 'Next Thursday. But sing again that song.'

I began to sing with overflowing enthusiasm and joy. I saw the effect of my singing on her. She began to tremble, her eyes were wet with tears, the colour of her cheeks turned pale and she sat down. Seeing her in that condition I went on singing with redoubled enthusiasm. When the song was over I said to her, 'If I am killed, then, do let my children know about my death.'

My words went to her heart. She replied in a tremulous voice, 'You will not be killed. I shall let you go home for the sake of your children.'

I rejoined despairingly, 'But even if you let me free, I shall not survive. I shall die of trudging in this forest. Then, you, too, might come to harm. I would not like to put you into trouble for the sake of my own life.'

Turaya remarked, 'Do not be anxious on my score. No one will suspect me. I am the daughter of the chief. The

tribesmen will all do my bidding. But tell me, if you will be able to send the money as soon as you reach home.'

I answered joyously, 'Yes, Turaya, I shall remit the money'. Turaya assured me, while going away, that she would arrange for my release.

Thereafter, she often talked to me about my children. Asad Khan, these Afridis truly love children very devotedly. If Providence has created them as barbarians in some respects, He has also not kept them bereft of some characteristics, worthy of man.

At last Thursday arrived, and yet the Chief had not returned home. Nor did any other member of the tribe come back. That evening Turaya came and said, "I cannot go to-day, for, my father has not returned home. If he does not come back by tomorrow I shall set you free at night, so that you may return to your children. But remember that you have to remit the money. I trust you."

I then sang the usual song with great gusto. Turaya sat listening to it till mid-night, after which she went back to her cave to sleep. I prayed to God that the Chief would not return home on the morrow. My feet had become useless because of their having been imprisoned in those beams so long. My whole body was aching. I was much better off in the dungeon, for there at least I could move freely my hands and feet.

Next day also the party did not return. So Turaya was feeling very anxious. In the evening she came to me and said, 'Prisoner, you can go now. I shall, however, escort you over a short distance.'

For sometime I lay on the ground till my feet gained freedom in movement when, thanking God for His grace, I rose and accompanied her.

To please her I sang all along the way. She would hear the song and weep alternately. At about mid-night we reached the tank when Turaya, turning to me, said, 'Go straight and you will reach Peshawar. But be cautious lest somebody's bullet claims you. Here are your clothes; but positively send the money. I shall stand as a surety for you. If the money is not received both of us shall lose our lives. If, on the other hand, the money is received no Afridi will thereafter ever attack you even if you kill some one. May God protect you and reunite you to your children!'

Turaya retraced her steps and went back home humming. It was past mid-night. An awful silence reigned everywhere; only the wind moaned. The moon shone in all her brilliance in the middle of the sky. It was not wise to stay any longer by the bank of the tank. So I advanced slowly southward. Every now and again I looked round. At last, by the grace of God, I reached the outskirts of Peshawar at daybreak.

The Frontier was guarded by soldiers. No sooner did they sight me than there was a stir in the whole camp, for, they had already counted me as dead. They were, therefore, all very much pleased to see me back home.

Colonel Hamilton, too, on getting the news about my return came instantly to meet me. After inquiring from me what had befallen me he said, 'Major, I got your two letters but I could not even dream that they were in your own hand. I considered them to have been forged. God be praised that you have returned alive.'

I thanked him, but said in my own mind, 'A native's writing is looked upon as forged. If only a white man had written the same letters then, by now, four instead of two thousand would have been remitted, and, God knows, how many

villages burnt down; nay, who knows what further steps would not have been taken, too?’

I silently went home. I rejoiced to see my wife and children again. That very day I sent two thousand rupees, through a trusted servant, to Turaya.”

4

Major Himmatsingh heaved a deep sigh and said, ‘Asad-Khan, I have not as yet come to the end of my story. The painful end still remains to be told. Gradually, after coming here, I overcame all my troubles. But I could not forget Turaya. It was through her kindness that I was restored to my family; nay, I had got back my life. How could, then I forget her?’

Months and years sped by. But I never saw again Turaya or her father. Once or twice Turaya had told me that she would come to visit me, but she did not. I sent away my wife to her parents’, fearing lest Turaya, finding her in the home, might look upon me as a liar. But when three years had passed and she did not turn up I recalled my wife from her parental home. We were living quite happily when suddenly the hour of trouble struck again. One evening I was sitting with my wife in this very verandah and talking to her when some one knocked at the outer gate. The servant opened it and at once a Frontier Pathan woman ran upstairs fearlessly.

On gaining the landing she asked in fluent Pushtu, ‘Where is the soldier?’

I came out and asked, ‘Who are you? What do you want?’

Taking out a few corals she said, ‘Have these for sale. Will you buy them?’

Saying this she placed some big corals on the table. My wife, who had entered the room along with me, began to examine them. Thereupon Turaya asked, ‘What is that woman to you?’

I replied, 'Of course, my wife.'

She rejoined, 'But you told me your wife was dead. Did you marry a second time?'

I answered in an angry tone, 'Shut up, you fool, you must be dead, not she.'

My wife fortunately did not know Pushtu. She was engrossed in inspecting the corals.

I do not know why at my words the eyes of the Pathan woman began to gleam. She said severely, 'Yes, had I not been a fool how could I have set you free? You told me a lie, you scoundrel. If your wife was not dead then, then she will be dead presently.'

Instantaneously she sprang upon my wife like a lioness and plunged a sharp dagger through her breast. I advanced to parry the thrust but she ran out into the balcony and said, 'Come and know me. I am Turaya. I came to your house to-day to live in it. I wanted to marry you and settle down here as a housewife. For your sake I sacrificed my father and my home, my all. But you have turned to be a liar and a cheat. You may now mourn the loss of your wife. I shall mourn yours'. Saying this she fled downstairs.

After Turaya had gone I looked at my wife. The dagger had pierced her heart through, and the single stroke had done her to death. I sent for a doctor, but alas, she was dead before he arrived."

As the Major related this sad episode his eyes were filled with tears. Wiping on these, he said, 'Asad Khan, I never suspected even in dream that Turaya could be of such a devilish heart. Had I seized her up properly then this calamity would not have befallen me. But the room was dark; moreover, I had given her up as lost.

Since then Turaya has been never here again. Now whenever she sees me she hisses past me like a she-python and my heart begins to beat fast, confounding my wits. I have tried several times to have her arrested, but the moment I see her my resolution pales fire and all my courage fails me.

Besides, even now Turaya bears love towards me. She always makes rich presents to my children, whenever she comes this side. When she does not see the children, she leaves her gifts behind in the house. A piece of paper with the inscription, 'For the Sardar's children' is usually tied round them.

I have still not been able to fathom this woman. And more I try to do this, the more am I baffled and the more hard-hearted does she become. I cannot make up my mind as to whether she is a human or a she-devil."

Just then the Sardar's son came there and said, "That woman has left this golden amulet to-day".

The Sardar, turning to me, observed, "Did I not tell you about her presents to my children? Look, even to-day she has given this amulet. She has given innumerable gifts to Arjun and Nihal. Indeed, Turaya is a very strange woman."

5

I bid good-bye to Sardar Himmatsingh and set my feet homewards. The old man's corpse had been removed from the cross-roads. But when I reached the spot my hair stood on end. At once I stopped in my course. Suddenly I turned back, for like a shadow, I was being chased by a woman. Seeing that I had stopped short she also did the same and went into a shop to buy something. I asked myself, "Is she Turaya"? and the heart answered, "Yes, she is Turaya."

Why was Turaya shadowing me? All along the homeward way I was pondering over this. On reaching home I took my

dinner and lay down for rest. But sleep would not visit my eyes because the effect of what the Sardar had told me during the day had been very disturbing.

The military gong sounded twelve, one, two, but I was still awake. I tried to sleep by turning from side to side. But when eventually sleep actually overcame me, I do not remember. Though I was asleep, yet my consciousness was awake. It seemed to me as if some woman, who resembled Turaya a good deal in her features but was more dreadful-looking than her, had broken into the house. She had a sharp dagger in her hand, which shone in the light of the lantern. She was advancing towards me softly with wide-awake eyes. I desired to get up from my bed, but my hand and feet were paralysed. She came near me, looked at me for a while and raised the hand in which she was carrying the dagger. I tried to raise a hue and cry but my throat was choked. She pressed both my hands under her knees and sat on my chest. I was restless when my eyes opened. And, behold! There sat a Pathan woman on my chest. She had a dagger in her hand and was on the point of piercing it through. I exclaimed, "Turaya!"

She was, in fact, no other than Turaya. Holding me down with force she said, "Yes, I am Turaya. Today you have shed the blood of my father, in return I shall shed yours".

Saying this she lifted her dagger. It was a life-and-death question for me. But love of life gave me courage. I was not willing to die, because I had still many desires and ambitions unfulfilled. I struggled hard to release my right hand from her grasp and at last succeeded in doing so. I seized Turaya's hand with the dagger but, I do not know why, she did not protest. She got off my chest and looked intently at my hands.

I observed laughingly, "Turaya, now the tables are turned, and after your father, it is your turn to die now."

Turaya did not reply, but continued to gaze at my hands. I teased her and said, "Why do you not speak? Your life is now in my hands". At last she opened her lips and spoke in a solemn but stern voice, "You are my brother. Today you have killed your own father?" I burst into laughter at her words and exclaimed, "That the Afridis can be also crafty, this I have realized only today." Turaya replied serenely, "You are my long-lost elder brother, Nazir. The mark on your hand betrays your identity." Since my childhood a snake had been tattooed on my hand and this identification mark had been recorded also in the army register. I laughed again and said, "Turaya, you cannot deceive me and I shall never let you go."

Throwing away the dagger from her hand she said, "You are, indeed, my brother. If you do not trust me, then see this tattoo mark of a snake on my right hand."

I looked at her right hand and saw that it had exactly a mark like mine, I wistfully added, "Turaya, I cannot trust you. It is mere coincidence that we happen to have identical marks on our hands". Turaya replied, "Let go my hand. I shall not attack you. The Afridi never tells lies."

I let go her hand and she sat down on the ground. She began to stare hard at me. After a while she asked, "Do you know anything about your own parents?"

I shook my head and said, "No, I was brought up in a Government Orphanage."

Turaya instantly rose from her seat and said, "Then you are my long-lost elder brother for certain. You disappeared a year before I was born. You were with my parents when they attacked the Government forces. My mother was a skilful fighter. You were tied to her back when she was fighting. A

bullet struck her in the foot and she dropped down senseless. At that time some one unstrapped you and took you away. My father brought back my mother on his shoulders, but you could not be traced. Mother often used to tell me about you. She, too, had the snake tattoo-mark on her hand."

She then showed me again the same hand. I compared my mark with hers and discovered that both of them were exactly like each other. I was stunned and fell down on my head. Turaya began to wipe off affectionately with her hand the perspiration on my brow. She said, "Mother used to say, 'Nazir is not dead and that one day he would be united to us'."

I was beginning to believe Turaya. Some one within me was telling me that what Turaya was saying was true. Heaving a deep sigh I said, "Turaya, then he whom I killed to-day was our own father?" Her face was darkened by a small cloud of sorrow, and she exclaimed with a heavy heart, "Yes, Nazir, the unfortunate victim was our own father. Who could foretell that he would be killed at the hands of his own son?"

Presently, however, she exclaimed in a consolatory tone, "But, then, Nazir, you did the deed in ignorance. After father's death I had become very lonely. But now because I have found you I shall forget my sorrow. Do not be sad, Nazir, you did not know who your father was and who your mother. See, I myself came to kill you, but by God's grace I noticed the family's mark on the hand. God's will be done!"

From Turaya, later on, I learnt that my father's name was Haiderkhan. He was the leader of an Afridi tribe. I talked to her also about Sardar Himmatsingh and discovered that she had begun to have love for him again. She had quarrelled with father in order to marry him, but the sight of his first wife in the house maddened her with jealousy and anger, and she put her to death. She had gone there in the disguise of a Pathan

woman with a view to having some fun with Sardar Himmatsingh, but the wheel of fate turned her in a different direction. I told her about the Sardar's sad plight. She listened to what I said but soon wistfully remarked, "No, he is a cunning fellow. I shall never marry him, but for your sake I am ready to forget the past. Bring home his children tomorrow. I would mother them."

In the morning when my servant saw me, with surprise in his eyes, with Turaya, I said to him, "She is my own younger sister". At first he did not believe what I said. But when I told him the whole story he did.

Forthwith I sent him out to make a search for father's dead body. He came back before long and reported the corpse was still lying in the Police Station.

At once I sent a letter to the Colonel, telling him the whole thing, and requesting him for handing over the corpse to me and I received his permission shortly afterwards.

I also wrote a letter to Sardar Himmatsingh, asking him to come to my house. He came promptly and no sooner had he arrived than he inquired, "Asad, what is the matter? Why did you ask me to see you so soon?"

I answered laughingly, "Major, my name is not Asad, but Nazir." He looked at my face with wonder-struck eyes and said, "Have you gone mad overnight!"

I again laughed and said, "No, wait a while, there is still some other surprise in store for you. Turaya is my sister and the person whom I killed yesterday was my father".

These revelations stunned him. He felt as if he had a fall from the sky. His eyes waxed in wonder. He said, "Asad, do you want to turn me also mad?"

I held his hand and said, "Come in and have the whole story from Turaya's own lips. She is at my place and has been waiting for you ever since."

He followed me as if he were stupefied. Seeing him enter, Turaya laughed and said, "Prisoner, sing that song again". Thereupon both he and I burst into laughter.

Motioning him to a seat, I told the whole story to the Sardar. He said, as soon as the narrative had come to a close, "Nazir, hereafter I shall call you by that name. I ask for Turaya's hand in marriage."

I replied smilingly, "But you are a Hindu, while we are Mohammadans."

He laughed and rejoined, "Soldiers know no caste or creed". Thereupon Turaya interposing said, "Sardar, I shall not marry you. But if you send both your children to me, I shall be a mother to them."

The Sardar laughed and went away.

That evening Sardar Himmatsingh, Turaya and myself along with a few of our fellow-soldiers buried the dead body of our father.

The sun was setting. Darkness was creeping on, and we two, Turaya and I, stood by the grave of our father, reciting the requiem.

